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HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the MASTER of SUSPENSE

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February 1971

Dear Reader:

Hearts as cold as the winter wind pump a flood of evil juices through this issue, commencing with *Swan Song* by George Grover Kipp, whose private eye reverts for a time to devious service of the government. The ensuing misdeeds are climaxed by the novelette *Black Disaster*, a subterranean suspense tale by Richard O. Lewis.

A host of other fine authors are here to depict for you a wide cross section of the virulence that thumps in malevolent man's breast. Among them, Donald Olson conducts *The Blue Tambourine* in a macabre, dark solo. Max Van Derveer takes an inner view of organized crime in *The Second Bird*. Innocents are bled in *Night Shift* by Jaime Sandaval and in *With a Little Bit of Luck* by Benjamin Swift.

This by no means purports to introduce all of the new stories that February blows your way, as you are about to determine for yourself. First, however, be certain to seal off all drafts. There are chills aplenty to come in these pages.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 16, NO. 2 FEBRUARY 1971

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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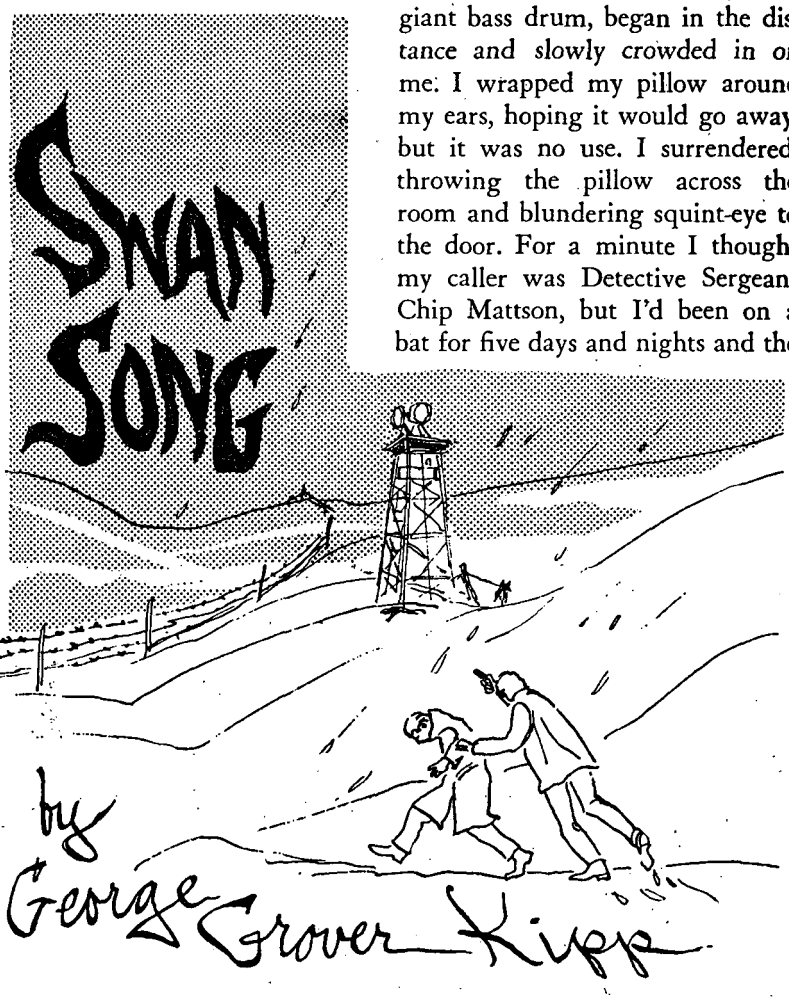
Whatever the tune, and whoever the piper, the enactment of one's swan song is, of necessity, a solo performance.



THE NOISE, like the beating of a giant bass drum, began in the distance and slowly crowded in on me. I wrapped my pillow around my ears, hoping it would go away, but it was no use. I surrendered, throwing the pillow across the room and blundering squint-eye to the door. For a minute I thought my caller was Detective Sergeant Chip Mattson, but I'd been on a bat for five days and nights and the

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sergeant hadn't been along. Besides, the way he kept blurring and billowing, I decided it was just an illusion with a big fist.

"You look like warmed-over death, Darby," Chip said, shaking his head wearily. "You need a shave and a haircut and you smell like a damned billy goat. What hit this place, a typhoon?" Chip found a clear space on the sofa and peered at me over an array of empty bottles and lipstick-stained highball glasses. He ran his eyes over the shambles and shuddered. "Could you manage to sober up a bit? I met a friend of yours this morning and I think you're supposed to go to work."

"Work?" I croaked. "Don't use filthy language so early in the morning."

Chip leaned back and jerked the string on the drapes, and a spear of brilliant sunlight ricocheted off the bottle collection and seared my eyeballs.

"For your information," he said, "it's two o'clock in the afternoon. You've celebrated your divorce with five days of booze and broads, and it's time to wake up. And in case you're interested, I'm *supposed* to be on vacation."

I found the refrigerator and fumbled a cold beer toward the wall opener. As the icy liquid soothed my tortured pipes I thought I might even live out the day. "There were other reasons for the party, but that's beside the point. What momentous crisis brings you to spook a poor Irish shamus, on vacation even? Yours, I mean; I can't afford a vacation."

Chip shook his head wearily. "I was on my way to the tall and uncut when I ran afoul of Fingers Shultz. I don't know what you've got going with him, and knowing full well that it's probably on the shady side, I deliver the message anyway: Hymie Stark is missing."

I was half drunk, stupefied from a five-day bout with the grape, but Chip's words slashed through the cobwebs clouding my brain. I could almost feel the ice forming in my veins, but I managed to hold my voice down to its normal timbre. "You're sure?"

Chip nodded affirmatively. "I ran into Fingers this morning. He said he'd been looking for Hymie for three days and you for two, with a corresponding lack of success in both departments. Hymie hasn't been around, either. I checked myself, in case Fingers was out on cloud nine from an overdose of whatever he might be on."

"Wait here a minute," I said, then headed for a fast, cold shower and shave. It took considerably longer than a minute but when I got back to Chip I felt almost hu-

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man again. I looked it too, except for the bloodshot eyes.

I put in a call to maintenance to have the pad cleaned up, then invited Chip to join me in a belated breakfast in the cafe across the street. He settled for coffee while I went to work on a choice sirloin.

"I don't know what to make of you and Fingers Shultz," Chip said. "Suppose you whisper a few deep, dark secrets into my ear." He kept his eyes on my face, ready to leap at the first sign of an untruth.

I shook my head, gently. "I can't, Chip. At least not yet."

He studied me closely. "Hymie Stark is a kook, meaning he's out of place on skid row. His conversation, habits, character, and even his wearing apparel fail to fit into skid row. At first I thought he fit the scene, and he dressed like he did, but then he changed. He's like a quiet river, still and deep, which brings me to my question. Does your connection with Hymie Stark have any connection at all with the four years you spent in Europe with the CIA?"

Chip Mattson and I are of a size, six foot, one hundred and seventy pounds, but he is blue-eyed, blond, fair-skinned and damnably handsome, while I have a beat-up mug that's invariably described as 'craggy' or 'chiseled', never handsome. Chip and I know each other well. We should. Our trails have been crossing for the better part of five years. Sometimes I need a favor; sometimes he needs one. It was supposed to be his turn.

I chewed on a piece of steak. "No comment."

Chip nibbled reflectively at his lower lip. "I've suspected as much for some time. On the one occasion when Hymie got falling-down drunk, I got a good look at his ID. Then this morning I ran into a guy who's been asking too many questions about you and Hymie for the last two days. He's still in the diplomatic service, according to his ID, but he's an 'old friend' down here on a social call, according to his version."

Chip's words put a glow of warmth into my heart. That man and I had stood with our backs to the blaze of international politics on many occasions and as a 'backup' man in a tight spot he was the best in the business. I sipped my coffee. "Charley Boey. He was second to Hymie in the espionage business a few years back. The last I heard he'd moved up a notch or two, pretty close to the top of the heap."

I agreed to meet Chip at headquarters in an hour, as soon as I could locate Fingers Shultz and ask a few questions. Fingers had long since retired from the offen-

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sive vocation of opening other people's strongboxes and safes for a living, but he'd come to my assistance on a few occasions when the information I needed reposed behind the tumblers of somebody's safe. I found Fingers brooding over a glass of beer in a tavern.

When he saw me he shook his head hopelessly. "Nothin', Brad. Nothin' at all. I took this town apart and Hymie's gone. Pfft, just like that. I was keepin' an eye on him like you asked me to, but things had been quiet so long, and there was this good western playing at the Blue Mouse, with John Wayne even, and you know how I go for good westerns. Hymie disappeared while I was in the show. The last person I could find who had seen him was The Duchess. She was juiced to the gills, as usual, and talking real crazy. She said Hymie and two men were getting into a black car when he called to her and said he was going after two dollars and sixty cents worth of extrasensory perception. Ain't that a lulu? Enough to give a headshrinker the heebie-jeebies. She passed out cold while I was tryin' to get her up to her room, and when I finally made it, she went into convulsions. Her landlady took one look and called an ambulance and had her hauled away to the hospital."

My guts were twisting into a cold, hard knot, but I managed to shrug. "Hymie will probably be all right. I'll be in touch."

I left the tavern and headed for Hymie's hotel on the fringe of the skid row area. I had my own key so getting into his flat was no problem. I found the usual Hymie trademarks: volumes from Byron, Poe and Bierce, records from Tchaikovsky and Victor Herbert, hand-carved ivory chessmen, and a lone painting by Van Gogh. I'd searched the flat for a half hour and had all but given up when I noticed the mitered hardwood frame, three inches high, supporting the television set. From afar I seemed to hear Hymie's well-modulated voice: 'Get to the bottom of things.' It was but one of Hymie's many cryptic remarks that were a total blank to the uninitiated and like a headline to the people who knew him.

I tipped the TV over on its side and there, inside the frame, was a small black case. I knew before I opened it that it contained vials of serum and a hypodermic syringe. I locked the door behind me and headed up the street to headquarters.

When I entered the squad room, Charley Boey came to his feet and held out a firm hand. A smile of genuine happiness crinkled the cor-

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ners of his eyes. "It's been a long time, Brad."

My thoughts rolled back through the years to a cold, wet, foggy morning in the mud, ten miles south of Checkpoint Charlie. Those days had been incredible, the nights indescribable, but somehow we'd managed to survive. "Too long, Charley," I said. "You're looking good."

"You, too," he lied gallantly. "Pull up a chair and let's kick it around a bit. From my corner, it looks like the Old Man might be in over his head."

He held out a postcard that had been mailed from Portland five days earlier. The message, in Hymie's precise script, read: *Point-Counterpoint.* I didn't have to dig out the code book to figure out what he meant.

"He's in over his head," I said. "We both knew it was coming but neither of us suspected it was so close. When he couldn't find me he fired the card to you. And now, unless we can get a derelict wino broad to clarify a highly cryptic remark, we've blown the whole package." I told him about Fingers Shultz and the remark The Duchess had made to him.

"Don't mind me," Chip Mattson chimed sweetly. "Ignore me. Pretend I'm not here . . . hurt my feelings . . ."

Charley Boey had been in the dark corner too many times to let the possibility of impending death dent his sense of humor. "Shall we tell him?" he asked indifferently.

"Why not?" I said. "He might want to tag along out of curiosity. Too, there's always the off-chance we might need the services of the authorities. Shall I do the honors, or will you?"

"Take it, man," Boey said. "Right from the top."

Chip ran a hand wearily over his face. "Please do." Every cop that had passed his desk had offered a coy comment about certain people working on their vacations, and Chip was ready to blow.

I took a deep breath and got down to the nitty-gritty.

"Back in nineteen sixty-four, while Hymie was with the Canadian Diplomatic Corps in Europe, he got word that a certain communist big shot desired to set up a meet with him; the purpose, defection to the West. The situation was exceptionally risky because the potential defector was suspect and the secret police were breathing down his neck. It was a matter of move fast or don't move at all. Hymie didn't have time to put the matter through the proper channels, so he took it upon himself to handle the entire matter on his own. As gambles go, it was a long shot, a real

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long shot, but it didn't faze him.

"Twenty-four hours after getting the word, Hymie was in Prague, posing as a bottle salesman with a soft-drink trade mission. He speaks the Czech tongue fluently so he had fairly easy going. He managed to meet the potential defector but the man was fearful of using any of the standard methods pertaining to his position. He demanded that Hymie head out with him immediately, as his hours were in short supply. Anybody else would have run like hell, but Hymie isn't anybody else. He's Hymie. He knew he was pushing political dynamite into the flames of international havoc; a diplomat posing as a native salesman; false papers, illegal entry, the whole nasty works. But the defector possessed an unparalleled store of vital information, and the opportunity comes that rarely that Hymie refused to pass it up. A couple of NATO characters had just slithered under the iron curtain and the least Hymie could hope for, if he succeeded, was to offset the damage they had done by throwing a checkmate of his own with newly acquired information. If he lost, it would make little difference, as the West was as far out on a limb as it could get."

I paused to light a cigarette. "Well, Hymie and the defector made a run for it. The hue and cry was raised immediately but Lady Luck was with them. They made it all the way back to the barbed wire and land mines dividing East Berlin from West Berlin before they were spotted. At two o'clock of a cold autumn morning the red guards sprayed them with machine-gun fire as they crawled through the mud. Hymie dumped two guards and one sentry dog with his hand gun and then somebody shot out the searchlights. That gave Hymie and the defector the few vital minutes they needed to crawl through the slop to the safety of West Berlin."

Chip Mattson had leaned slowly backward in his chair as I spoke, his brow furrowed with disbelief. "You *are* talking about the old gent with the umbrella and bowler and horn-rims and rubbers. The one who lives in that old hotel over by the Broadway Bridge?"

I endowed Chip with a patronizing smile. "That 'old gent' was one of the deadliest, most capable men ever to engage in the field of international espionage. Few of his accomplishments ever made the headlines but that was the way he wanted it. Hymie was a helluva hand for results, not headlines. The defector was badly wounded from the machine-gun fire but that didn't stop Hymie.

"He got a doctor to patch up the

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man and then got a list of the questions he was supposed to ask. When the answers reached headquarters they immediately sent another list of questions. It went on like that for two months—questions coming, answers going—and then, when the defector had told all, the Canadian authorities let Hymie have it, broadside. He was being retired, period.

"Not only had the reds finally deduced who Hymie was, they'd also shot a film with an incriminating close-up of Hymie at the trade mission. From that time forward, every minute he put in the service of his country placed it in jeopardy; his only recourse was to accept the retirement 'suggested' by the government. Hymie had played the game for a lot of years, and he didn't want to quit. It was then that he came up with a stroke of true genius.

"He informed his superiors that the defector, whose name he had never revealed, had been issued a set of false papers and would enter Canada routinely with a group of immigrants. He wouldn't even tell the authorities *which* group. They didn't like it but, in view of the services rendered by the defector, they could do little else but agree. That made Hymie, retired or no, the only possible link between the defector and the red agents. They got onto his trail with great dispatch and they've been dogging his steps ever since. Hymie led them a helluva merry chase—Mexico City, Barbados, Rio, New York—just to amuse himself. Then a couple of years ago he decided to see if he could give them the slip. That was when he came to Portland. It looked real good for a while, but a few months ago he came to see me and told me the opposition was crowding in on him again. He didn't say how he knew. I think he can smell the slobs."

Chip's jaw dropped ludicrously. "You mean he's been scooped up by commie agents right here on the streets of Portland?"

"That's exactly what I mean," I said. "The reds want that defector back in the worst way, and the only road to him leads straight through Hymie's brain. If they can pull this caper off, it will not only add to the image of relentlessness enjoyed by their secret police but it will also discourage others from cutting out on their own with state secrets. Hymie knew it was just a matter of time until they made their move. When he couldn't find me, he fired the card to Boey. It's up to us to spring him out of the trap. If we miss, Hymie is doomed; if we score, the goon squad has had it because the commie high command doesn't tolerate blunders and

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failure but recognize only success."

Boey's eyes widened slightly as I pulled the black case from my pocket and placed it on the desk. "Hymie's medication?"

I nodded affirmatively. "Hymie's medication. Without it, he's going to be a very sick man. In fact, a prolonged period without it will prove fatal, and it's imperative the opposition agents never learn how sick he really is."

Chip batted his blue eyes blankly. "This is incredible. Hymie must be every day of sixty and he won't weigh an ounce over one hundred and forty."

"Very true," I agreed. "But one hundred and thirty of it is steel nerve. Right now, we'd better be getting a move on before Hymie is beyond help. He and I discussed the possibilities of this deal several times; what the opposition agents might and might not do. An important item, now, is how many commie ships are in West Coast ports. They'll undoubtedly try to smuggle him out of the country, and a ship is their only chance."

Boey nodded solemnly. "That's the way I've got it figured."

Chip reached for his telephone and dialed a number. "Sergeant Mattson of the vice squad here. I'd like to know how many ships from communist nations were in West Coast ports forty-eight hours ago; how many are in port now, and the expected times of departure over the next forty-eight hours." He drummed his fingers impatiently on the desk as he waited for the information to come through. Finally, he reached for a pad and pencil. "Okay, go ahead." When he was through writing he had three names on the pad: the *Chenkovsky* in San Pedro, the *Pirogov* in Vancouver, B.C., and the *Tamerlane*, loading grain at Longview, Washington.

"The *Pirogov* is out," Boey said. "I blew the whistle on this caper before I took my quick leave of absence from Ottawa. The commies wouldn't have a prayer of smuggling Hymie out that way."

I studied the names. "That makes it either the *Chenkovsky* or the *Tamerlane*. They've had plenty of time to get Hymie down to San Pedro, so it's anybody's guess." I turned to Chip. "Could you get the port authority in San Pedro and have them go over the *Chenkovsky* with a fine-tooth comb just before she sails?"

Chip reached for the phone again. "I can give it the old college try!" He explained his desire to the person on the other end of the line, listened for a moment, a frown growing on his face, then hung up. "The *Chenkovsky* sailed two hours ago, a full twenty-four

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hours ahead of schedule: destination Hungnam, North Korea. She's already too far out to be stopped."

Boey's brow knitted with concentration. "So much for the *Chenkovsky*. They had enough time to get him on board, but somehow it doesn't jibe with their style of doing things . . ."

I shared Boey's feelings. When you've gone so many rounds with a guy you learn all there is to know about his style, and if your brains aren't completely scrambled, you develop a sixth sense about him. Boey and I had survived a lot of rounds with the red underground. In fact, he was still in the business full time.

"My money goes on the *Tamerlane*, down the river at Longview," I said. "We know *what* they're up to. The big questions now are the *how* and the *when*."

"Next stop, The Duchess," Boey said.

Chip was intrigued with the sinister double-dealings of the world of espionage. "What about The Duchess? Does the phrase, 'Two dollars and sixty cents worth of extrasensory perception,' mean anything to either of you, other than an introduction to the DTs?"

"Not at the moment," I said. "Hymie is a master at cryptic comments and shaded remarks. It could mean a lot of things. Our best bet is to learn the circumstances under which the statement was made and try to narrow the choices."

When the doctor heard my request he shook his head disparagingly. "The patient is in critical condition; cirrhosis of the liver, malnutrition, delirium tremens . . . Establishing rational communication with her is well-nigh impossible."

"May we wait in her room?" I asked. "We won't bother her, and there's a chance that in her babbling we might find what we're looking for. If we don't get the information we're after, the results could be disastrous."

Behind me, I could sense Chip and Boey nodding solemn agreement.

The doctor nodded reluctantly. "I suppose it will be all right. But don't do anything to disturb her. She's been under sedation and anything she says would be meaningless."

The Duchess had never been classed as pretty, and now, with fifty-odd years of hard living behind her, she was a bloated caricature of a human being. While Chip and I strained to catch every syllable she mumbled, Boey kept his eyes on her lip movements and attempted to record the words in

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shorthand. After twenty minutes that seemed like a week, the doctor shook his head.

I could see The Duchess was tiring, maybe going off the deep end for the long count while we stood helplessly by. Hymie's chances for survival were getting slimmer with every passing second.

"Tell me about Hymie and the two dollars and sixty cents worth of extrasensory perception," I rasped desperately.

The doctor raised his hand in alarm to silence me, but The Duchess had already stiffened as if she were slipping into the first stages of rigor mortis. For a long minute the antiseptic cubicle was deathly silent. Then her lips moved haltingly: "Bl . . . black . . . Chry . . . Chrysler . . ." She sighed and lapsed into unconsciousness.

Back in Chip's car, I scratched my head and tried to figure it out.

In the back seat Boey was doing the same thing. "Extrasensory perception . . . two . . . six . . . oh," he said softly. "Two dollars and sixty cents, extrasensory perception and a black Chrysler. What in hell do you suppose the old boy was getting at, Brad?"

I didn't know. I couldn't think and I was getting desperate. All I could come up with was a long-shot hunch that sounded crazy even to me. I turned to Chip. "Put in a call to motor vehicles and see what they've got on license number ESP-260."

"It's just crazy enough to be a start," he said as he pushed the car door open and headed toward a phone booth. He returned within five minutes, a hard light in his eye and a slip of paper in his hand. "We might have something. The license fits on a black Chrysler owned by a Stanley Wucinski, about fifteen miles out of town on the Salem Freeway."

"Wucinski," I grunted.

"You're kiddin'," Boey hissed.

Chip eased the car into the flow of traffic and herded it toward the freeway. "Did my information strike a nerve?"

"That's putting it mildly," I said. "The original name of the golden defector was Emil Wucinski . . ."

Chip let loose a low whistle and stomped on the gas.

Stan Wucinski was six-foot-two of Polish honesty and forthrightness. He worked in a service station and was saving his money toward the day when he could buy his own station. Besides the Chrysler, there was a pickup with a camper parked under some trees in the yard.

"The Chrysler? Last Wednesday?" Wucinski repeated slowly in response to Chip's question. "Nobody was driving it. We were on

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vacation up on the Rogue River all last week. In fact, my boss came up for some fishing on Tuesday and Wednesday. Call him. He'll vouch for me." Suddenly Wucinski held up a hand, a light growing in his eyes. "I wonder. It might be . . . It just might be . . ."

"What might be?" I pressed.

"My cousin Ed, from the old country, visited us about a month ago. He said he was just on vacation, but neither my wife nor I believed him. He's been a loyal party member for fifteen years, and when the party puts up the kind of money he was carrying, it gets something in return. I let him use the Chrysler while he was here. Outside of my wife and myself, nobody else has driven it since I bought it.

"I make a few dollars on the side buying cars and fixing them up for resale. That's why I bought the Chrysler. A kid in town wanted to buy it so I had it ready, except for servicing, before we went on vacation. I haven't been in it since."

I crawled into the car and went through it a square inch at a time. It was clean. If Hymie had taken a ride in it he'd been doped or unconscious, because there wasn't a thing to tie the car to him.

I was studying it disgustedly when Boey reached out suddenly and wrapped his fist in Wucinski's shirt front. "How long you been working in Newport, mister?"

Wucinski was baffled, as were Chip and myself. "Right there," Boey said grimly, pointing at the service sticker that came into view when the door was opened. "It says Ransom's Service Station, Newport. And the date is last Wednesday."

A strange light crept into Wucinski's eyes. "I mentioned to my cousin that the car needed servicing, but he didn't know anything about mileage and oil changes and such things. In the old country he either rides a bicycle or he walks. It figures he had a key made and took the car while we were gone, but what was he doing down at Newport?"

I was pretty sure I knew. "Did he happen to mention an Emil Wucinski while he was here?"

Stan nodded slowly. "Emil is a second cousin, but I've never met him and didn't pay much attention. Emil was high up in the party when we came to America six years ago."

"Newport," Boey said meditatively. "It would be too risky trying to smuggle Hymie on board the *Tamerlane* while she's in port, so it figures they've got him on ice somewhere and they'll attempt to move him out in a small craft and slip him aboard the *Tamerlane* in

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international waters. Very neat."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Chip growled as I swung his car west toward the coast instead of heading back toward Portland. "It's still possible your man was shipped off to Siberia on the *Chenkovsky*."

Boey slouched in the rear seat and quietly tamped a load of tobacco into his pipe. "I'll have to go along with Brad on this one. It's a typical commie setup all the way. Hell, it even smells like one of their capers. We've both heard the owl hoot along the red trails and the implications in this setup are unmistakable."

Chip's formidable mental processes hadn't been idle. "Why is it so important to Hymie that the opposition goons never learn just how sick he really is?"

"He never said," I lied glibly.

Chip wasn't through. "You said that at the time Hymie and the defector were crawling under the barbed wire to West Berlin *somebody* shot the searchlights out. Almighty convenient, wasn't it? *Somebody* just happening to be out there in the mud and cold at two o'clock in the morning?"

"They were good men," I said.

"The finest," Boey chimed in immodestly.

I held the car on eighty, hoping the seething black overcast boiling through the sky would develop into a good blow. By the time we reached Newport the weather was darker and dirtier, and the barometer was taking a nose dive. I parked the car where the piers go down to meet the sea and looked out over a chorus of whitecaps pirouetting away to meet the thirty-foot swells battering at the horizon. A sigh of relief escaped my lips when I finally spotted the *Serendipity* bobbing impatiently in her slot.

She belonged to a crazy ex-marine, ex-deep-sea diver, ex-highway patrolman who'd finally found his niche in life following the salmon runs of the Pacific Northwest and the tuna migrations off California. Red was on board, pursuing the painting and scraping that separates the Bristol-type boats from the scows. We'd chipped a few foxholes together in the frozen earth around the Chosin Reservoir and the friendship had grown through the years. Red met me with a paint-dabbed handshake.

When I'd explained our mission and what we were up against, he shook his head dubiously. "*One boat out of Newport?* That's like trying to find a master pickpocket in Times Square during the rush hour. It can be done all right, but the chances of success are a little slimmer than somewhat. Besides,

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there won't be *any* boats going out of port today, not in this blow."

"This one has to go out, Red," I persisted. "It has to . . ."

Red grinned. "You call the signals, buddy, and I'll give you the best I've got."

While Chip and Boey made a quiet survey of the harbor from a pair of rental cars, I put in a call to the coast guard. Small craft warnings were up from Seattle to Crescent City, not that it would mean anything to the slobs holding Hymie. The warnings don't have to be acknowledged, but no boatman in his right mind would be putting out to sea. The *Tamerlane* had cast off her lines at four o'clock, and in another six hours she would pass the Columbia Lightship at the mouth of the river on her way to the high seas. Time was running out.

The wind was a cross between a moan and a shriek when Chip returned to the *Serendipity*. He shook his head. "The north side of the harbor is dead, nothing moving over there at all."

Charley Boey arrived minutes later. "The storm has the port hogtied, but I've got a nibble over on the south side. Two characters were bustling around on a sixty-footer called the *Doodlebug*. They ducked when I drove past and I pretended not to notice them. It looked to me like they were getting ready to head out."

"The *Doodlebug*," I repeated dryly. "Now there's a nice all-American name. Who would suspect she flies the hammer and sickle in the engine room?"

Boey calmly pulled a revolver from his pocket, his face immobile as he fitted it deftly with a silencer. "Now that we've found the boat we want, where do we take her, Brad? In port or out on the briny deep?"

"Right where she sets," I said. "Once she gets out of the harbor she'll be bouncing like a cork and we'll never be able to board her." I turned to Red. "Take us in alongside the *Doodlebug*, and then duck."

Boey came to his feet, slipping the gun into his pocket as he headed for the hatch. "I'll go by car and meet you there. No sense in leaving the back door open for them. If you don't catch them on your end, I'll nail them as they head back up the pier." He eased up the ladder and disappeared through the hatch.

Chip was at my elbow, both hands gripping the rail, as Red brought *Serendipity* alongside the *Doodlebug*. One man was on the pier casting off the lines, a second man was on deck hauling them in, and a third was crouched

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behind the wheel of the sixty-footer.

We'd moved fast, but even as the *Serendipity* nudged the *Doodlebug* Charley Boey moved in behind the man casting off the lines and shoved his gun in his ribs. The man dropped the line he was holding and moved over to catch the lines Chip was throwing ashore.

The creep on the deck of the *Doodlebug* slashed the last line with a knife and sprinted toward the wheelhouse, but by then I'd vaulted the two rails as they came together and was waiting for him as he careened around a corner. I caught him flush on the chin with a solid right and he folded like a wet dishrag. Boey and his captive from the pier had barely scrambled aboard when the ship wallowed backward, then turned and shot for the open sea. I got one glimpse of Chip swinging a hatchet frantically at the lone line holding the *Serendipity* captive.

"Keep going," Boey called above the scream of the wind and the salt spray. "I've got these two. Take the guy at the wheel."

Even as I crouched and began easing along the wheelhouse, he was lashing the hands of the character I'd belted behind his back.

Giving the devil his just dues, the helmsman was no novice with a gun. He got off two shots at me that were real close. If it hadn't been for the sickening roll of the boat and his preoccupation with the wheel he'd have done a lot better. I answered him with three shots, fast and low and close together, through the wall. When his face dropped from view I charged through the hatch.

The boat had swung broadside to the waves and was dangerously close to broaching by the time I reached the wheel and brought her around. The helmsman lay on the deck, pain distorting his features as he tried to stem the flow of blood from the gaping hole in his left calf. He looked from me to his gun which had landed in the corner, and licked his lips, but he knew he'd never make it.

Boey came through the hatch, herding ahead of him the guy from the pier and the one I'd belted, and Red brought the *Serendipity* alongside. I could see his familiar grin as he gave me a 'thumbs up'; everything was under control.

"You'll never make it," the guy I'd belted snarled at me. "There are two men below with guns, and they aren't going to give up. Push your luck and the old geezer with them dies."

I backhanded him in the mouth with a wallop that drove him into the wall. "Then you'd better go below and tell them we've got con-

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trol of the wheelhouse, and if they're half as smart as they ought to be they'll come up slow and easy, *after they throw their guns up*."

I jerked the hatch open and gave him a shove that carried him down the steps end over end. With his hands tied behind his back he couldn't help himself, and he landed on his face with a sickening squish.

From his position behind the wheel, Boey nodded solemn approval. "It's nice to see you haven't lost your touch, Brad. Brute force is the only way to get through to these slobs."

A minute later two guns landed on the deck at my feet. They were followed immediately by a scholarly type in fedora, topcoat and pince-nez, a broad-faced creep who looked like he belonged on a tractor in the Ukraine, and the jerk I'd tossed down the steps. I was ready to charge down the steps myself when the broad-faced creep gave pince-nez a sly smirk.

"Into the corner and strip," I

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growled. "And make it snappy."

When he opened his yap to protest, I drove the muzzle of my gun into his spine by way of his navel and he shed his duds like magic. I did likewise, keeping the gun ready at all times. As I made broad-face put on my clothes, a grin crossed Boey's face. He emptied his gun and silently handed it to me. I gave it to broad-face and headed him toward the hatch. He realized at the last minute what I was up to, but by then it was too late. I gave him a shove that sent him stumbling down the steps, and he was halfway to the bottom when two flashes leaped from a darkened corner. He'd barely plopped at the bottom of the steps when I drove three fast shots into the corner and jumped back.

"It's your turn," I told the creep with the mashed-in face. I untied his hands. "Down the hatch, comrade. Toss up the hardware and then start packing the bodies up. Try getting cute just once and I'll splatter your friends here all over the place."

Pince-nez got the message and barked rapidly in some Slovak tongue. He was beaded with sweat and definitely in no mood to die. Ten minutes later I had all the guns, two corpses and four prisoners. The gunman I'd nailed as he shot broad-face was Stan Wucinski's old-country cousin, Ed.

I also had Hymie Stark. His face was drawn and a glaze coated his eyes as he fought the lethargic roll of his head. With one arm wrapped around the binnacle, he managed to stay on his feet and fight his way back to reality.

"He's been anesthetized," pince-nez offered nervously. "He is just shaking off the effects of the drugs."

"Filthy devils," Boey growled angrily from behind the wheel.

I was inclined to agree with him, but it was no time to be indulging in personalities. I signaled Chip and Red that everything was all right, then told Boey to head back to port. During the trip, I managed to get Hymie into a corner and, unseen, give him an injection from the medicine kit I'd taken from under his TV set.

Back at the pier, while Boey hustled Hymie off the boat, I herded pince-nez as far as the gangway. He was still sweating unseasonally.

"You're going to be late for your rendezvous with the *Tamerlane*, comrade, so you'd better hurry. If you're smart, you'll scuttle this tub and let the world think she went down with all hands," I said. "And if any of you creeps try sneaking back ashore, you're going to meet the finest reception committee you ever heard of." I stepped to the pier

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and cast off the lines just as Red brought the *Serendipity* into the next slot.

Chip Mattson wrapped his big fist into my coat front as the *Doodlebug* backed away and shot for the breakers. "What kind of an idiot stunt are you trying to pull off, Darby?" Anger glittered in his eyes as he released his grip. "Never mind. I'll have the coast guard on them before they get five miles out."

As Chip turned to head up the pier, I brought up a jolting right uppercut that snapped his head back and sent his hat sailing away on the wind. I caught him before he hit the planking and carried him back on board the *Serendipity*.

When he finally opened his eyes, the *Doodlebug* was well beyond recall. He crawled out of the bunk and sagged onto a bench at the galley table. "You'd better have one hell of an explanation cooked up for this one, Brad."

I shoved a cup of steaming coffee and a bottle of Red's bourbon in front of him. "I'll give it a try but, like you, I'm just a bit player in the big drama. The production, direction and staging all belong to Hymie. He engineered this deal so those creeps on the *Doodlebug* would have to return to the motherland empty-handed. It worked beautifully, too. They've had it, but good. From here on, they're headed straight for the salt mines."

Chip downed a swallow of bourbon and chased it with the coffee. "The preparations were a bit too elaborate just to scuttle a goon squad. Suppose you fill me in on the rest of the play."

I didn't like the subject, but I went ahead. "Hymie is dying by inches. He has been for two years now. It's doubtful if he has three months left. Thinking of him was the chief reason I got so drunk. My divorce had very little to do with the binge. Before Hymie checks out, he wanted one final crack at the red apparatus, sort of a farewell gesture. He couldn't do it alone so Boey and I came in to help him, just like we did in the old days in West Berlin. Now that Hymie has the opposition all stirred up about finding Wucinski, he's going quietly off into the wilds of Canada to keep his appointment with The Man with the Scythe. Having no relatives, there will be no mention of it when he passes on. Hymie has led the reds a merry chase for a lot of years and this way he will keep right on doing it after he's dead. This was his final act, his swan song, so to speak. I'm glad it worked out for him."

At the airport I shook hands with Charley Boey, and then gripped Hymie's hand for the last

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time. He'd walked up as we drove into town and for a while he was the Hymie of old, the eyes never resting, the amused half-grin uptilting the corner of his mouth as he stared out on a world he'd helped preserve. We'd pulled some rank capers together, he and Boey and I. We'd courted disaster and flirted with death in the name of freedom and democracy. Looking back, none of us had anything to apologize for . . .

As the jet raced down the runway and roared into the rain and blackness, I didn't try to hide the mist in my eyes. "This is the old boy's finest hour, Chip. I can just see him sitting up there on a cloud, laughing himself silly, while the red agents run around in circles for the next ten years looking for two dead men."

"Two dead men?" Chip echoed warily. "Where did you come up with the extra corpse?"

The lights of the plane winked one last time and disappeared into the night.

"He was Hymie's idea, too. You see, the defector, Wucinski, never really got to Canada. He lived just long enough to answer all the questions and then died of gunshot wounds. On the same day, Hymie got word he was to be retired, but he'd been in the business too long and he didn't want to quit. That was when he had the brainstorm about having Wucinski enter the country under a phony name. It was a fantastic idea, and it worked to perfection."

Chip's eyes widened with surprise. "Then those poor fools on the *Doodlebug* have actually been searching for a ghost for the last five years. They couldn't have won, no matter what . . ."

"Don't hold it against them," I said. "It's not every day a person comes up against a Hymie, not even in the espionage business."

Chip turned toward the terminal, the wind and rain whipping his coat around his legs. "Swan song or otherwise, Hymie played quite a tune." Admiration was strong in his voice.

I nodded agreement. "I never did meet a man who could dance to it . . ."

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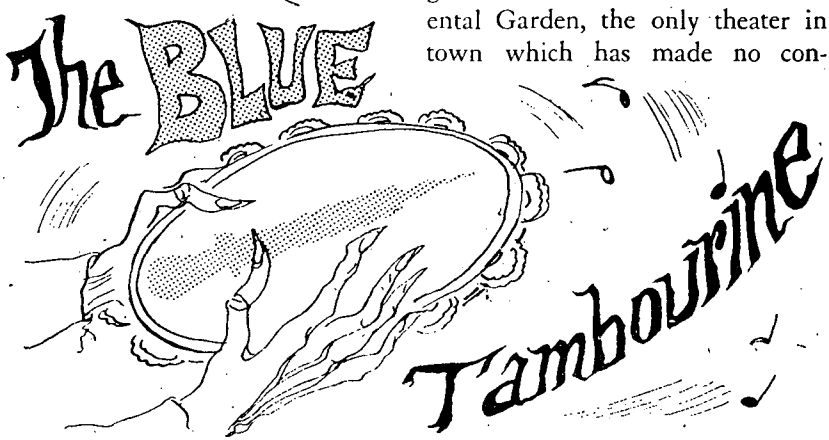
The steps are few between a dream and a nightmare.

The BLUE Tambourine



IN THE SHABBIEST precinct of a city so long tainted by economic blight that he is even denied the companionship of his own image in the grime-crusted windows of its vacant buildings, Willie de Garde stoops to snatch a starving cat from a dark doorway, pops it into the sack he carries for this purpose, and then hurries on, for the night air is sharp, winter close at hand. A cold fog shortens the streets and makes pretty but useless golden roses of the street lights.

The young man cradles his furry prize tightly against his chest, as if to revive it by contact with his own strong young heart, and his steps quicken as he approaches an old brick building whose facade still bears faint traces of a gaudy elegance. It is a theater called the Oriental Garden, the only theater in town which has made no concessions to the changing habits of its patrons, and consequently has lost all but a special few. It has not modernized its marquee, nor improved its lighting, nor installed retractable seats or refreshment stands, and it continues to show movies consistently lacking in appeal to the general public.

The almost total darkness does not confuse Willie, who knows his

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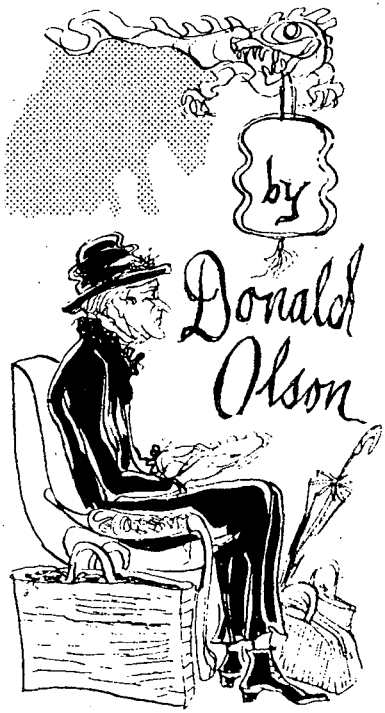
way around and can find his usual seat with no other guide than a few spots of orange light where mandarin-colored bulbs glow eerily beneath plaster bas-reliefs of Chinese maidens wearing kimonos that are now chipped and paintless. Overhead, a similarly despoiled jet-black dragon with only one red bulb of an eye holds in its teeth a huge black and crimson Chinese lantern.

Those who still patronize the Oriental Garden seek something other than entertainment: a place to sleep, a place to hide, a place to hope for one of those exceedingly rare occasions when some black-sheep cousin of Eros might lead to a nearby seat a figure whose needs, communicated by signals as universally understood by the initiated as the Morse code is by the fraternity of wireless operators, might correspond to one's own.



Occasionally one might see, it's true, a white-skinned leg extended at a grotesque angle, and a spider-like hand creeping and crawling from ankle to thigh, but it is more often to the solitary passions that the Oriental Garden caters. It is a popular refuge, for instance, of lonely drunks who stumble into the orchestra to sleep off a binge after offering rumbling, gratuitous criticisms of whatever story is unfolding above them on the tarnished silver screen.

Like these others, Willie de Garde comes to the Oriental Garden for a purpose, and no sooner is he seated than his eyes peer through the gloom as anxiously as a seaman's through coastal fog until, perhaps from nearby, perhaps from the other side of the theater, he hears the jingle of the blue tambourine, a sound which violates the silence no more harshly than a discreet cough, and which is repeated at intervals until he has found his way to Mrs. Rainfyre's side.

Without the sound of the blue

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tambourine she might never be located, for she dresses always in black from head to foot, in garments as out of fashion as her face, a face rather like those that peer out of pre-Renaissance paintings, a Margaritone or a Cavallini, a somber, slant-eyed face as ravaged by time as the plaster faces of the Chinese maidens on the frieze above their heads.

"*Buona sera*, Poet," she greets him as he slips into the seat beside her. "What have you brought me?"

"A choice ingredient for your witch's brew. Another cat."

As usual, she ignores this little dig, just as she drops no hint of what she does with the creatures he brings to her. Nor does he ever ask. It's none of his business.

As he drags the unprotesting cat out of his sack, Mrs. Rainfyre settles her black umbrella against the farther seat and deftly plunges the animal deep into her own black leather shopping bag.

"Quick!" he whispers, for having fulfilled his part of the bargain he is eager for the customary payment; his eyes begin to water and his lips to burn as she rummages in yet another bag as if for some trifle requiring much fishing about to locate.

"*Ecce*!" she murmurs as a figure looms dimly beside them in the aisle, groping blindly along the dark, narrow row of empty seats.

"He can't see! Hurry."

"Ah, *pronto*, *pronto*," she hisses, mimicking his urgency as her yellow fingers fasten upon the glimmering hypodermic, while the other hand grips his already bared arm pumping up the vein and finally puncturing it with a deft thrust of the needle.

As she puts away her instrument she engages in familiar small talk to which he scarcely listens. "How goes the poem? Soon finished?"

His body droops limply against the seat. "Soon . . ."

"Ah? But not *too* soon, one hopes."

He is so little aware of her now that he misses the faint note of alarm in her voice. "You have other—customers," he murmurs.

She strokes his thigh with an impersonal touch, cold and sexless. "You are my favorite, *care*."

As soon as she departs, carrying her bags, her umbrella, and her blue tambourine, he too drifts out into a foggy drizzle in which the golden roses on their iron stems appear to expand and throb above him, and as he passes through squalid alleys, his mind in a state of swiftly laddering exaltation, a cascade of brilliant images floods his brain so that he fears it will explode before he reaches his own room and can transfer them onto

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paper. He moves very quickly now.

This creative mood is sustained for an unusually long period, and he is not aware of its passing until one garish dusk as he stands at the window of his room and watches the sun, like a mad arsonist lighting fires in the windows of buildings across the street, while the sky above this conflagration grows purple with news of an approaching storm.

Being above all else a poet, Willie de Garde seeks no logical explanation for the way in which Mrs. Rainfyre manages to be in the Oriental Garden whenever he has something—a cat, a puppy, a rat, a bird—to exchange for her ministrations; he is happy to grant to he occult powers of divination, in spite of having seen her on the street one day, all in black and carrying her usual luggage, stooping to crush a wad of bills into the grubby hand of a dwarf, who thereupon whispered something in her ear which sent her scurrying off in another direction. Apparently, Mrs. Rainfyre paid a whole brigade of street creatures to keep her informed of the desires and movements of her clientele.

When next he creeps into his seat at the Oriental Garden, Willie is shaking with something besides the craving of his burning nerves, for this time he harbors the secret of betrayal, the giddying knowledge that this will be the last time the odious harpy stabs him full of dreams, for the poem is almost finished and he will spend a vagabond winter in the South. He speeds merrily toward the jingle of the blue tambourine.

"*Buona sera*, Poet."

Her perfume is as offensive and rank as the stench of brimstone in the halls of heaven. "Hurry!" he pleads. "I need it!"

She doesn't move. "Ah, Poet, we all have special needs tonight."

"Shoot me! Shoot me!"

"Slowly, Poet. Tonight you must pay for my merchandise."

He jabs at the bag in which she has deposited the gray squirrel he brought her. "I've paid, beldame!"

She jiggles a note of laughter out of the blue tambourine. "These pets you bring me—you think *they* pay for what you get?"

"Give it to me!"

"Will you pay?"

"I'll steal a lion from the zoo in broad daylight! But give—"

"Look. Empty." She opens the black bag and he plunges his hand deep inside, drawing it out damp and trembling.

"I must have it! Now!"

"So you will, *care*, so you will. We're going to leave this place together and go where you will be given what you crave—in return

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for a small service," she whispers.

They leave the theater and she leads him through a twist of streets and alleys to a tenement in an even more desolate part of town. In a filthy vestibule a dozen rusty mailboxes hang empty and unlabeled on the leprous wall. A bulb glimmers at the top of a long flight of steps.

A flight above this ill-lit landing they stop outside a door upon whose frosted pane has originally been painted in black letters the words:

RAINFYRE
PHOTOGRAPHER

However, the second word has been unskillfully scratched out and underneath has been inscribed the word, ESCHATOLOGIST. Mrs. Rainfyre pauses to let him read this before taking a key from her pocket and letting him in.

In a room as dismal as the Oriental Garden, a man sits quietly reading at a cluttered table. He looks as if he had been glued together out of miscellaneous pieces of chalk and string, for there is a curious incompatability about his features; nothing seems to match. His glasses are so thick they give the illusion that his eyes are actually inside the lenses instead of behind them, rather like monstrous green buttons laminated in plastic spheres. The top of his head is covered by a cap made from a woman's silk stocking; the lobes of his ears sprout grizzled white whiskers. Willie scarcely notices any of this, so fascinated is he by the man's right arm, which ends in a flipper instead of a hand, an elongated tapering paddle of tissue and skin. The left hand is normal, although extraordinarily tiny and delicate, like a girl's.

"My husband," gravely announces Mrs. Rainfyre.

His voice is a passionate squeak. "Honored, dear boy. I know you well already, I feel." A nod toward his wife. "Forgive my not offering my hand, but, as you see . . ." and he deliberately waves the grotesque flipper in Willie's face, at the same time laughing with a sound like breaking glass. "A congenital inconvenience, most distressing at such a time."

"A crucial time," adds Mrs. Rainfyre darkly.

Willie feels faint. "I need—" he starts to say, and Mrs. Rainfyre, leaving her husband to help the youth to a chair, hurries into another room, returning with a hypodermic wrapped in gauze. She no longer has the blue tambourine. Willie tenses his arm, but she merely lays the instrument on the table.

"Yes," purrs Rainfyre. "You need

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your—medicine. Of course. The inconstant muse must be enticed, mustn't she? I can't tell you how thrilled Mrs. Rainfyre and I have been to have been permitted to play the role, so to speak, of patrons of the arts in the life of so gifted a young man."

In the silence following this remark there comes from behind an inner door the distinct sound of the blue tambourine. Rainfyre smiles at his wife. She consults a clock on the wall. "You had best tell him what you must, and quickly. It grows late."

Rainfyre gets up and circles the table, thumping its surface with that obscene flap of flesh, while with his good hand he removes his glasses and massages his eyes.

"Mrs. Rainfyre is right, Mr. de Garde, and though I deplore the necessity of offering so abbreviated an explanation of what we're going to do I have no wish to conceal from you the reason for which we require your services. At this very moment I am engaged in the most important experiment of my career, an experiment that will crown years of prodigious labor and research. Research, I might add, financed solely by the commercial enterprise of Mrs. Rainfyre, and the demand for that commodity which she has been abundantly able to supply."

Again, from behind the door, comes the jingle of the blue tambourine, and Rainfyre smiles and says, "Once we pass through that door there can be no turning back. I tell you now, young friend, you are here under no duress, nor will you be coerced into taking part in the experiment for which we require your assistance—provided you leave at once and never come near this place again. But hear me! Mrs. Rainfyre will make no further visits to a certain tawdry cinema where you have so liberally availed yourself of her services. You will never see Mrs. Rainfyre again. You must employ some new device to woo your muse, or find some other agency. Which will not be easy, for this service of Mrs. Rainfyre's is seldom extended on such generous terms. Am I not right?"

Willie's head droops forward onto his folded arms, his body racked by the savage pangs of his addiction. The poem . . . the poem . . . so near completion . . . if only . . . if only . . .

"Many poets have paid a higher price than you shall be made to pay," whispers Rainfyre, as if reading his mind. "You are the reincarnation of Poe. The shade of Baudelaire. The ghost of Verlaine. An artist to your soul. Your work is your life, as is mine. Upon fulfilling your part of this little business

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you will be given what you and your muse crave, and as a bonus—hear this—the very instrument of your pleasure in an exquisite velvet-lined case, and with a sufficient amount of that commodity of Mrs. Rainfyre's as will make you a king of dreams, and your muse a slave."

To Willie de Garde, writhing in misery, it sounds like the promise of heaven. He nods his agreement.

Rainfyre vanishes on his tiny feet into another room of the flat, and Willie raises his head and stares at the glittering receptacle of his anodyne, which Mrs. Rainfyre, sensing his intention, snatches quickly out of his reach. Then she removes a locket from inside the collar of her dress and hands it to him. Through the mist that stings his eyes he sees the picture of a young girl of not more than nine or ten, with luminous dark eyes and massive ringlets.

"Our daughter, Poet. She died less than a month after her father took that picture. A drunken motorist ran her down in the street, crushed her little dancing legs. When they carried her to us in the house where we lived she was—"

"Still alive!" Rainfyre comes back into the room, wheeling before him on a squeaky-castored tripod a bulky crepe-covered object. "She lay for hours, broken, helpless, dying so very slowly. Near midnight she raised her little hand and weakly beckoned me. I looked into those eyes which had been rigid as stones with pain and saw such radiance she might have become an angel before death. Her eyes seemed to light the room, and she said in a strong, clear voice: 'Papa, papa, make them hurry. It's so pretty!' "

Behind his glasses Rainfyre's eyes expand like soap bubbles, seem sure to burst. "*It's so pretty!* Her precise words, Mr. de Garde. A moment later she was dead."

Raindrops tap against the black-curtained windows like the fingers of beggar children pleading to be let in. No one moves.

Rainfyre removes the shroud from the object and reveals an enormous camera of apparently antique vintage but fitted with innumerable shiny devices as terrifying as those that menace the waiting patient trapped in the dentist's chair.

Taking from his pocket three small pieces of stiff white paper, he lays them before the poet, who examines them gingerly, trembling. He sees nothing but over-exposed snapshots, dull on one side, glossy on the other, with vague bluish streaks on the glossy side.

"These, Mr. de Garde, are photographs of the last optical images in the brain of a dying guinea pig,

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one of the expendable creatures you so kindly procured for us. They're of no interest. I erred in the calculation of perceivable light ray intensity."

Again, behind the door, the jingle of the blue tambourine. There is a look of mild urgency in the smile that crosses Mrs. Rainfyre's face; her husband continues speaking, however, with no sign of haste.

"This, you observe, is a camera, with many sophisticated refinements. For several years I was a professional photographer. Now, as you may have read on the door, I am an eschatologist, an explorer of those ethereal regions my colleagues have heretofore ignored, although essentially it involves the same problems of timing and lighting. To oversimplify further, my boy, there is an instant between life and death when one is neither wholly out of this life nor entirely within the other. After the death of my beloved child, and with nothing but her deathbed cry to inspire me, I devoted myself to the exploration of that mystical borderland, and finally—yes, with this very camera!—devised a means of recording in black and white a picture of that afterworld whose radiant beauty illuminated my dying angel's face. With the brains of the animals you have procured for us I have mastered the enormous technical problems, and now—*now*, Mr. de Garde . . ."

Willie de Garde scarcely listens to this madness, so acutely painful are the symptoms of his body's deprivation. "Please! Give me . . . give me . . ."

"Yes, yes, soon, my boy. Very soon. Now come, observe."

Rainfyre takes the poet's arm and leads him to the door, pushes it quietly open. In the middle of a smaller room, a young girl sits on a straight-backed chair in a soft pool of light. She has long red hair and skin almost as white as the simple dress she wears. In her hands she holds the blue tambourine and she smiles with infinite sweetness as she gently taps it with her fingertips. She is totally blind, and sits stiffly, as if posed.

Though there was no perceptible sound as the door opened, she turns toward them. "Mr. Rainfyre?"

"Are you fatigued, child?"

"Oh, no. I've been listening to the rain and answering it with the blue tambourine. As long as I do that the rain won't turn to snow."

"Are you warm enough?"

"Yes."

"It won't be long," he promises. "We're nearly ready to take the picture."

Rainfyre motions Willie back

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into the other room and shuts the door behind them.

"You have glimpsed the rarest of treasures, Mr. de Garde—*total innocence.* A privilege, even for a poet. Our search for such perfect, pristine innocence makes a tale in itself, but we haven't time to entertain you with it now. Suffice to say it was most exhaustive and ended where it began—in this very building. She lives alone in a hole of a room on the floor above us, where she sits in the dark crocheting fancywork in exquisite designs, which she tries to sell by hawking them from door to door. If anyone deserves heaven, that child does."

The sight of the girl and the knowledge of what this madman plans to do with her momentarily distracts Willie from his own misery. He starts to protest, but Rainfyre hushes him with a threatening movement of the unformed hand.

"Don't distress yourself, my boy. The animals you brought to us died painlessly, and so will she." His magnified eyes roll upward in reluctant submissiveness to fate. "One would prefer to employ the brain of some hideous sinner, quite naturally. Alas, this is precluded by certain insurmountable technical problems. If you will pardon me for once again oversimplifying, and not to sound too flippant, one would need a most sophisticated flash device to take photographs of hell. So we had to skip that idea. And we needed, you must see, someone of unimpeachable purity in order to take pictures of heaven."

By now Mrs. Rainfyre is becoming quite agitated. She starts plucking at her husband's sleeve and casting urgent glances at the clock, but he goes on just as imperturbably. "Don't ask me to explain how the actual process works—a matter of electrical impulses flowing between the child's brain and the internal mechanism of this specially adapted camera. She thinks it's merely another picture. I've used her as a model for conventional photos on several occasions in order to dispel any qualms she might feel. She is patient and indefatigable. A saint. Her passing will be swift and humane, and at the last quick pulse of life the marvelously sensitive eye of this camera will register the visual image that flashes instantaneously across the optical nerves of her brain on the very threshold of the infinite."

Willie listens to all this with mounting nausea, while out of the corner of his eye he never loses sight of that fascinating steel instrument in Mrs. Rainfyre's hand. Loathing and revulsion serve only to quicken the burning appetite that has drawn him to this lunatic's

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room. He fights to keep alert.

"You are wondering precisely what you shall have to do?" says Rainfyre. "As you can see, I'm somewhat handicapped by this." He waves the flipper. "And I'm also afflicted with a coronary weakness that forbids undue exertion. Nor is my wife strong in anything but spirit. We must therefore rely on you, my young friend, to dispose of the—er—remains. You must carry the girl's body in a laundry bag down all these stairs to the alley. No one will see you, and once you've got to the river . . . You understand."

As he speaks, the photographer has been deftly, with his one good hand, rolling up Willie de Garde's sleeve, while Mrs. Rainfyre circles the table, the needle poised and ready.

"When you've completed your little errand you might wish to come back here and Mrs. Rainfyre will make you a lovely cup of tea. Yes. We might have a little celebration, just the three of us, and you could read us your poem. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Now he is opening the door into the inner room and Willie sees the girl in white playing happily with the blue tambourine, and then Rainfyre begins wheeling his terrible machine toward the door, pushing it along with the help of his tapering, fish-like flipper.

Willie's eyes are on the glittering shaft of the needle, but just as Mrs. Rainfyre extends it toward his naked arm he cries out and tears away from her grasp. Without realizing he is doing so, he snatches up the three photographs from the table as he lunges toward the door. Mrs. Rainfyre shrieks. An unlikely roar comes from the puny photographer.

Down, down, down the rickety steps he flies, crashing from wall to wall, bursting through the door and into the deserted street.

Breathless, he runs like a wild man through dark canyons of vacant buildings, big white crystals of snow settling upon his eyes and cheeks and lips like icy moths, and no matter how far and fast he runs he still hears in his head the mad jingling of the blue tambourine.

Near the end of the street a gust of wind tears the small white photographs out of his hand. He claws at the air to retrieve them, and thinks he has, but when he reaches the river and opens his fist he holds nothing but a handful of snowflakes.

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As one ancient philosopher advised, every advantage is judged in the light of the final issue.

ACCEPT NO Substitutes

by E. J. Payne

I saw Pluto Markham again today.

We were both Sigs at the university back in '27, but otherwise we had little in common. He had a raccoon coat, a private bootlegger, and a roadster with red leather upholstery. His nickname had not been bestowed lightly; he was big and arrogant and a pain in the neck, but the chapter was chronically broke, so they coached and repledged him semester after semester until he finally made his grades and could be initiated.

They didn't pledge me till I was a junior. I was a grind. I washed dishes at a sorority house for my board and did odd jobs for my landlady for my room; I tutored, graded papers, and sold themes. If the dean hadn't raised such a fuss about the Sigs' grade average, they never would have bothered with me. Oh, I knew it, and I took the pledge button in the same spirit in which it was offered, because it would be easier to wash dishes at the house, for one thing, and the fraternity, despite its deficiencies, drew a lot of water on campus. It took more than just grades to get into the law fraternity I had my

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eye on, and the Sigs had plenty of drag. Moreover, the old grads came back from time to time and picked out likely-looking seniors for their firms.

Except for Pluto, the brothers turned out to be pretty nice fellows, on the whole. He seemed to be bent on making up for his four semesters as a pledge by taking it out on us, and he possessed a nasty inventiveness and a strong right arm. After a couple of pledges were seriously hurt, the seniors got on Pluto and thereafter he did his dirty work away from the house. He didn't bother me much; I had very little free time, was as big as he and in much better condition.

The only real run-in I had with him was when he accused me of swiping his gold cigarette lighter. He grabbed my arm and hissed, "You took it, Holman, you dirty rat. Last time I saw it was the day it turned so cold. You were in my room fixing the radiator. Now, where is it? I'll beat the living daylights out of you if—"

I shrugged loose and stuck a fist under his nose. "You had better call a chapter meeting, *sir*."

He purpled with fury and finally got into his car and drove off. Nothing more came of it, but I was careful about isolated spots and dark corners from then on.

The last football game of the season was being played out of town, and the campus was practically deserted. I was alone in the house, cleaning the refrigerator, when Pluto came in, drunk. He made me take off his shoes, carry his stuff upstairs to his room, and used the paddle on me. It was when he wanted me to take off my pants that I balked. He swore at me. I said a few things myself and stayed out of range—no fist fights with actives for me. He started toward me and stopped, grabbing the back of a chair for support, swaying and mumbling obscenities. Then he tried to swing at me. A look of surprise, almost of horror, crossed his face, and he slumped to the floor and lay there breathing stertorously. I loosened his collar and tie and left him to sleep it off, shutting the door behind me. In a few hours he'd probably be on his feet and thirsty again.

Just as I was finishing the refrigerator, the phone rang—some girl inquiring for Pluto or any of the other actives.

"I'm sorry, he's passed out and all the others are out of town," I said, liking the breathless, tinkly voice. "Can I help? I'm Jess Holman, one of the pledges."

"Hi, Jess, you sound cute. I'm Betsy Sweiger, visiting next door at the Phi Eta house. I saw Pluto's car in the alley and I was going to sug-

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gest that he take me to dinner." She giggled. "I'm awful, aren't I?"

"Not a bit. He ought to thank you for remembering he's still alive," I said, recalling her suddenly. She had been a campus beauty my freshman year. Later she'd flunked out or something.

"That's cute of you, Jess. I just bet you're good-looking," the voice went on, warm and inviting.

My heart pounded and my face was perspiring. To my own surprise I heard myself saying, "How about me? Won't I do for a substitute?"

I worked hard for my money and till then I'd never found a girl worth spending it on, but I had a sudden acute desire to see her, to listen to that appealing voice. I wanted to spend my fifty hard-earned bucks on a girl I'd never met.

She thought it over, then said with a giggle, "Well, they're always telling you to accept no substitutes, but I think I'll take a chance. It sounds like the cat's, Jess. What time?"

"I'll be over in twenty minutes," I said, feeling like a king.

Tingling all over and a trifle light-headed, I went through closets, picking out a suit, a tie, a shirt. (This access to a plentiful supply of decent clothing had been another reason for my going Sig.) Finally, with a grin, I took Pluto's raccoon coat out of the downstairs closet. After all, she'd called for him originally, hadn't she? I took my own money, though. I was tempted to borrow Pluto's car, too, but I didn't dare. He seldom wore the coat, but the only walking he ever did was to and from that car. Instead, I took the Sig flivver, a decrepit vehicle with no top, no brakes (you had to use reverse) and only one headlight. It had a lot of allegedly witty slogans painted on its rusting flanks and a Navajo rug to blunt the springs that stuck out through the ragged upholstery.

Betsy was as cute as I remembered, a regular John Held, Jr. girl, with dark hair lying in wisps on her rouged and dimpled cheeks and eyelashes stiff and black with mascara. If she stood perfectly still, the fringe on her red dress just did make connection with the rolled tops of her pinkish stockings, but she never stood still. She looked me over and smiled, a slow delicious widening of the red, red mouth.

"Why, Jess, you cute thing, where have you been all my life?" she demanded, taking my arm.

"Missing you, baby. Let's go," I said, my heart pounding so hard I could scarcely talk. I had trouble getting the car started, but finally we were airborne, or at least I was.

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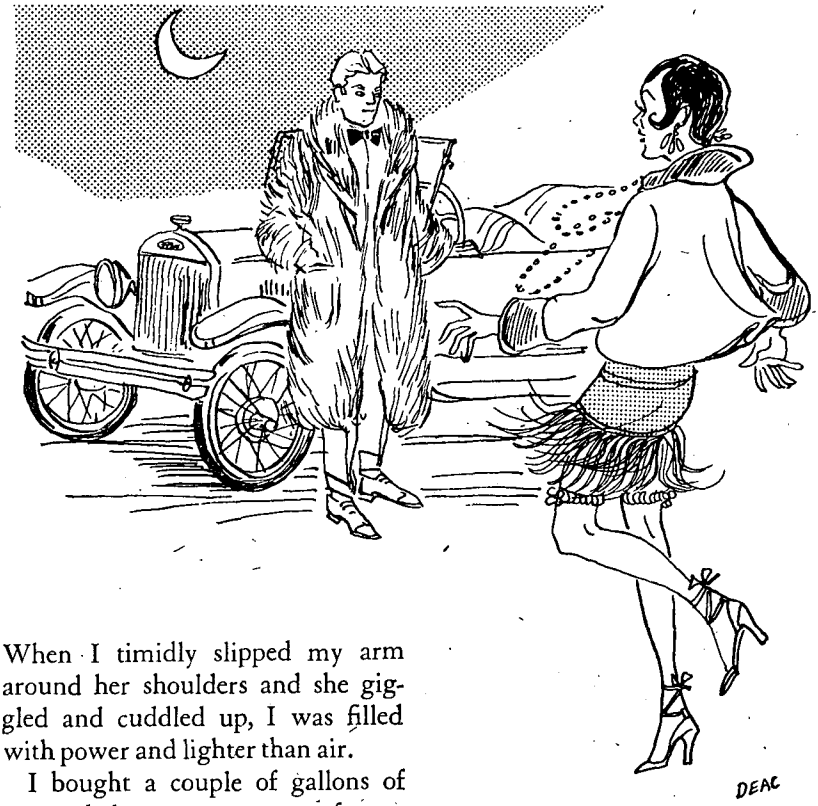

When I timidly slipped my arm around her shoulders and she giggled and cuddled up, I was filled with power and lighter than air.

I bought a couple of gallons of gas and, later on, a quart of corn liquor. We roared out to the Silver Slipper, which was the place to go that year. The few people who were there all yelled, "Hi, Jess," just as if I belonged there, and there was respect in their eyes. Whether it was due to the coat or the girl, my stock was definitely up. The headwaiter himself led us to a table at the edge of the dance floor and took off the RESERVED sign.

"Golly, Jess, you really do have a drag, don't you?" she said in an awed tone.

I laughed. "It's you, honey. The best for the prettiest girl in the house."

"Oh, Jess, you do say the cutest things."

I ordered setups and poured our drinks. "Here's mud in your eye, Betsy. Hope you like corn. I think it's safer."

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"It's my meat," she declared fervently, but she couldn't quite hide a grimace. I grimaced too—liquor had never fitted into my budget—but after that the stuff went down more easily, and the tawdry decorations began to look like something by Norman Bel Geddes. Even the cold, greasy fried chicken tasted wonderful. This, I decided, was LIFE and Betsy was heaven. I made up my mind to kiss her on the way home. We danced cheek to cheek and when, daring greatly, I kissed her ear, she looked up at me and smiled. Pure bliss.

People kept stopping by our table and I offered them drinks and presently the bottle was empty. I ordered another, $5.00 on delivery. The waiter had to go around to the back door for it and charged extra for the exercise. Bing Harper, one of the townies, and his girl Marge were sitting with us when that bottle went dry. We got another, and I waved aside his money grandly, but when I opened my wallet I was stunned to find that I was down to one five dollar bill. I fished it out hurriedly, added a quarter, and stuck the wallet back in my pocket.

When I glanced up, Betsy was looking at me with the funniest expression on her face. I didn't know what it meant—not till five minutes later when she looked at her wristwatch and screamed, "Oh, how awful! Is it already that late? Oh, gosh, Jess, I just *hate* it, but I just gotta go. I had a date at ten, and I simply forgot about it. I can't bear it—I absolutely can't—but I have to."

I knew then—gold digger leaving a sinking date. I said coldly, "Stand him up. You're already thirty minutes late."

She was shocked. "Why, I couldn't do that! I *never* stand anybody up. That's just practically the worst thing a girl can do, isn't it, Marge?"

Marge nodded solemnly. "A girl just can't do that. Posolutely, absotively not."

I stood up, gave my last quarter to the hat-check girl and strode out, followed by Betsy, protesting loudly that she'd only said dinner in the first place because she did have another date. In fact, she'd told me about it—I'd just forgotten.

If I hadn't seen that calculating, disgusted look on her face I might even have swallowed it, but the liquor was wearing off, my head ached, and inside me, like a lump of lead, was the realization that I'd squandered a lot of money I couldn't spare on a girl who didn't give a damn for me.

"Don't bother trying to explain. I'm broke, so I'm no good to you

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anymore. When we get back, maybe you can revive Pluto," I told her, driving as fast as I could.

"Well, at least he doesn't have to wash dishes," she yelled, "and he never was a barb!"

We didn't speak again. Looking at her sullen face with the smudged mascara and messy lipstick, I wondered what I'd seen in her. My head was still aching and I was tired, more tired than I'd ever been in my life. I dumped her in front of the Phi Eta house and went around and parked in the alley.

Pluto's car was still there and the door to Pluto's room was still closed, so I figured he was in there with a bottle. Otherwise the house was empty. I stripped off my borrowed finery as fast as possible. When I was hanging up the raccoon coat I went through the pockets automatically, and my hand touched something hard and cold—the lighter, the gold one, a neat little gadget with Pluto's initials on it and the whole surface covered with engraved curlicues. With a vague idea of springing it on him in some embarrassing fashion, I dropped it into my pocket and went out the back door.

The weariness had spread to my bones. I felt cold and slightly nauseated with anger, hurt pride and shame. I tried telling myself that things like that had happened to other fellows, that no one would laugh at me, that Betsy wouldn't tell Pluto—but I knew she would, and I knew that his laughter was the thing I wouldn't be able to stand. Well, why try? There were plenty of other colleges for a straight A student. A train would leave for the west in an hour—but I had no money. Well, there were freights, and to hell with my deposits. I had just time enough to go by my rooming house and pick up a few things.

Between the Sig and Phi Eta yards there was a narrow strip of untended ground, belonging to neither, which was variously known as Lovers Labyrinth. The Phi Etas sneaked out there to smoke, and Sigs who were either too broke or too stingy to take their dates elsewhere found the jumble of weeds and ragged bushes and broken-down chairs very convenient. Usually it was full of people, but right then it was deserted except for a couple of girls. I could hear their voices and see the red glow of cigarettes.

As I shut the back door and walked across the grass, Betsy's voice floated out through the stillness, "If you could have seen his face, Doris! The funniest thing I ever saw! His last five dollar bill—"

Doris said something and Betsy

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laughed. "Oh, don't be silly! Who wants a big drip like that? If I'd known he washed dishes, I'd never have made the date in the first place."

The cold and the weariness went up into my brain like the fumes of menthol, leaving it chilled and clear. I hesitated, and Fate took a hand.

A phone began ringing in the distance, and Doris cried, "My long-distance call!" Her cigarette fell in a crimson arc as she ran across the yard and disappeared into the Phi Eta house. Betsy sat on, smoking and humming *How Could Red Riding Hood Have Been So Very Good and Still Kept the Wolf from the Door?* Most appropriate. Even when I was directly behind her with my hands spread just the width of her throat, she sat there, swinging her foot and humming.

It didn't take long. She lay on the ground very quietly, and all I felt was an intense desire to wash my hands. I reached into my pocket for my handkerchief and touched the lighter.

Fate again, or maybe just justice—two birds, two evil birds with one stone. I dropped the lighter on the ground under a bush and walked swiftly to my rooming house.

Fate was still with me. Mrs. Schmidt's bedroom window glowed yellow. That meant she'd be undressing and she'd have taken her glasses off. Now, if I timed it just right, so that the sweep-second hand on the clock in her room was in just the right spot . . .

I carried in my nightly load of wood for her stove and dropped it noisily into the wood basket. She stuck her head out of the bathroom door, her hair in curl papers.

"It's me, Mrs. Schmidt. I'm afraid I'm a little late," I said.

She peered nearsightedly at the clock and nodded. "It's just quarter to eleven. You're not very late. It's no matter."

I went quietly up the stairs to my room, the feeling of destiny strong in me. Once fixed in Mrs. Schmidt's mind, the idea would never be uprooted. That phone call had come through at exactly 10:45—I'd looked at my watch. It had all worked out so perfectly: Betsy, the lighter, Pluto drunk in his room, and I had an ironclad alibi. I went to bed and fell asleep instantly.

An hour later the police were there, a blond, fat cop and a young, dark one. I put on a robe and answered questions readily, easily. All I had to do was relax and put my reliance in Fate. Yes, I'd had a date with Betsy Sweiger early in the evening. I'd taken her home about

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10:30, because she was supposed to have a date with some other guy at 10. No, I didn't know who it was, she hadn't mentioned his name. Yes, I'd been angry about it at first, but then I'd been sort of relieved because I'd run out of money—we would have had to go home anyway. Why did they want to know?

"She was strangled," said the fat one gruffly.

Hearing it was shocking, somehow. I was as horrified as if my own hands hadn't closed about that throat.

"What time did you get home?" asked the dark one.

"The clock in Mrs. Schmidt's bedroom said 10:45. She spoke to me about it. I was later than usual," I said, taking out a cigarette and lighting it.

They went over and over it, from the time I left Betsy at the Phi Eta house. Had there been anyone in the strip between the two houses? Yes, I thought so—I'd seen the red glow of cigarettes and heard girls' voices as I passed; two girls, I thought, but I really hadn't paid much attention. No, I hadn't heard a phone ring.

The blond cop took something out of his pocket and showed it to me. "Ever seen that before?"

It was the lighter.

I shook my head. "Why?"

He ignored that. "Do you know anyone who owns a gold lighter?"

I thought a moment and then nodded. "Pluto—I mean Ronald—Markham is supposed to have one. I've never seen it. Why don't you ask him?"

"We will when we can," he said soberly, putting the thing away.

"Hasn't he sobered up yet? He was out cold when I left the house this evening and his door was still shut when I came back later."

"Markham was taken to the hospital about eight o'clock, blind and paralyzed from drinking bad liquor. We don't know yet whether he's gonna make it."

As I said, I saw Pluto today. He's fatter and balder but he hasn't changed a whole lot—except for the wheelchair. The hospital is across the street from the jail and I could see him quite clearly from the window of my cell.

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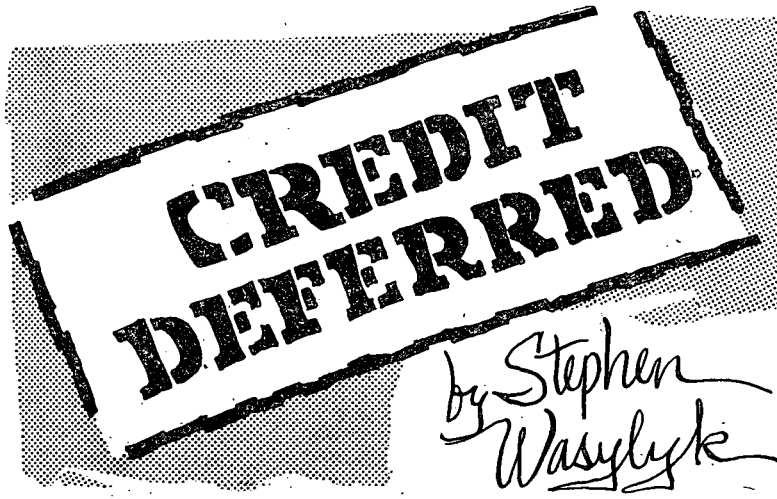
For one who takes undue credit, the time payment may indeed be lengthy.



THERE WERE two lights in a small, walnut-finished box on my desk. One flashed white, the other green, depending on how Chetkos wanted me to come into his office. The green light went on now, which meant hurry and be quiet.

It was a big improvement over his previous method of calling me. For years, he'd bellowed, "Mr. Stoneman!" at the top of his lungs.

I moved quickly through the connecting door. Chetkos was at his desk, his white head cocked to one side, listening.

A woman's voice was coming from the telephone amplifier on his desk, a little gimmick I'd installed one day when he was out. He hadn't approved of it at first, but after a time he wouldn't use his regular phone at all.

The old man held a finger to his lips to keep me quiet and motioned me closer.

". . . So you see, Martin, John is in the hospital now."

"What happened to him?" asked Chetkos.

"Someone must have forced his

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car off an embankment on the old Meridian Pike. He is fortunate to be alive. The surgeon who examined him seemed to think the injuries were more than he could have received in the crash. There is a possibility John was beaten first." The woman's voice was a flat monotone, as if she were afraid to show emotion.

"The weather has been particularly bad," said Chetkos. "Perhaps it was just an accident."

"No," she said. "John is a careful driver and he knows that road well."

"Is it possible to talk to him?" asked Chetkos.

"I'm afraid not. His jaw is broken, his head is completely wrapped in bandages and he is under heavy sedation." The voice broke.

"I see," said Chetkos. "What would you have me do, Judith? This is a matter for the police, not an attorney."

"The police aren't interested, Martin. They have listed it as a simple drunk-driving accident."

Chetkos looked at me and shrugged. "I shall see what I can do. Will you be home this morning?"

"I'll be at the hospital after ten."

"Very well," said Chetkos. "We shall contact you there." He pushed the button that broke the connection.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"You heard a goodly portion of it. John C. and Judith Smith were once neighbors. I am certain you have heard of John C. Smith."

"President of a small but growing bank."

"His wife wants us to look into his accident." He looked at me shrewdly.

"No, you don't," I said. "I'm due in court this afternoon and I have my own personal problems this morning."

"What problems could you possibly have?"

"A wife who uses credit cards and charge accounts too freely."

He chuckled. "That is a common failing of wives. You have plenty of company. Simply tell her to stop spending."

"I tried," I said dryly. "I not only didn't get anywhere but now she isn't speaking to me."

"All things pass," he said. "Rhea is a sensible woman. She will compromise. Be firm."

"Advice typical of a bachelor," I said.

"Your appearance in court is in behalf of whom?" he asked.

"Cool Papa Benson."

"I was under the impression Mr. Cool Papa had given up crime."

"He has. He's in court because of a faulty identification. A woman

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witness picked him out of the mug shots and swears he took part in a holdup."

"Doesn't he have an alibi?"

"Unfortunately not. Cool Papa has been holding down two jobs and was in transit between them when the holdup was committed. It is theoretically possible for him to have been there.

"The only evidence is the witness?"

"So far. It is only a preliminary hearing," I explained.

"How do you intend to handle it?"

"I haven't decided yet." I headed toward my office.

He held up a hand. "Suppose I defend Mr. Cool Papa while you see Mrs. Smith?"

Why don't *you* take care of it? You know them, I don't."

"I would like one of your incomparable, purely objective opinions."

I groaned. "I'll go." There was nothing else I could say. A request from the old man was the same as an order, as far as I was concerned. I owed him a great deal. He'd taken me right out of law school and brought me along until I was his partner, inoculating me along the way with a great deal of legal wisdom and knowledge his brain had acquired in forty-five years as a trial lawyer. He was content now to let me do all the work, making infrequent court appearances and taking most of the credit for the firm's successes.

I grinned, thinking of the newspapermen who cover the courts They looked forward to seeing him because he was always good for a story.

Turning my file on Cool Papa over to him, I picked up my car and headed for the hospital and Mrs. Smith.

The weather was terrible, had been terrible since the day before. A front had rolled over the city, first bringing with it a heavy sleet storm that had glazed the streets and still lingered in spots; then a heavy fog that clung like a blanket. Traffic was slow, piled up in all directions, and the radio forecasts offered no hope of clearing soon.

I found Mrs. Smith waiting in the lobby, a dark-haired, fashionably-dressed woman with a great deal of presence, carrying her age with an easy confidence. After I introduced myself, we found a table in the coffee shop.

"Tell me about it," I said.

"The police called me early this morning. They said my husband had been drinking and had run off the road."

"You don't believe it?"

"John does not drink to excess," she said firmly. "Furthermore, the

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doctor thinks he may have been beaten beforehand."

Which was what she had told Chetkos. "What time was this?"

"They found the car about one."

I frowned. "Where was he coming from at that hour?"

Her eyes became puzzled. "I really don't know. Last night, the bank was open until nine. He usually stayed later, but not that late. I was very worried before I heard from the police. There was no one I could call, of course: The bank had been closed for hours and he was usually last to leave."

The waitress brought two cups of coffee. I sipped mine thoughtfully, wondering where Smith could have been between nine and one. Wherever he'd been, he'd acquired the beating and the snootful. While there were plenty of places in town where these were easy to get, they were hardly the places you'd find a man like Smith.

"I understand your husband can't talk," I said.

"His jaw is broken," she said quietly.

"Perhaps he could write answers to questions."

Her lips worked. "His arm is fractured, too."

Smith would be of no help in explaining where he'd been. Even the most adroit questioning wouldn't get much from him.

"You've talked to the police?"

"A Sergeant Clover. I tried to explain something had to be wrong, but he wouldn't listen. He believes my husband got drunk, was in some sort of fight and drove off the road in the bad weather on the way home."

"And your opinion?"

"It might have been that way, but after thirty years of marriage, I don't believe it. Someone tried to kill him."

I put down my cup carefully. I hadn't counted on anything like this. "Why?"

"I have no idea."

No wonder Clover hadn't taken her seriously. "I think I had better talk to both his doctor and the police," I said slowly. "I'll check back with you later. Where will you be?"

Her shoulders moved. "Where else but here?"

The doctor's name was Denver. He was tall, young, and tired of talking about John C. Smith. Evidently the police had questioned his judgment. So did I.

"What makes you think the man was beaten?" I asked.

He angrily pointed a finger. "Because I say so."

I grinned. "I take it the injuries are not in keeping with the accident."

"They *might* be, but in my opin-

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ion there is some question. The fractured jaw, for instance, could be due to the accident, but there are many facial bruises that are doubtful."

"You tested his blood for alcoholic content?"

"Certainly," he said impatiently. "It is necessary before administering the anesthetic. I would have to say he was intoxicated. Which is another point."

"He couldn't handle a car?"

"He would have had difficulty walking."

"One thing I'd like to know," I said. "Would you be willing to swear to all of this in court, if necessary?"

"Clover asked me that," he said slowly. "I'm afraid I couldn't. But swearing to something and being sure of it personally are two different things."

"Your personal opinion is that the man was beaten?"

"Yes," he snapped.

Until then, I had my doubts about the whole thing, but there was something in his face and his voice that convinced me it was no ordinary accident. I knew I couldn't face either Chetkos or Mrs. Smith if I dropped it. If Chetkos would let me drop it, which he wouldn't. The old man always insisted on firm, definite answers. I sighed and picked up the car, heading for Sergeant Clover.

I found him at police headquarters, a heavy man with thinning hair and a tired expression.

"I've heard of you, Stoneman," he said. "If I hadn't, I wouldn't even talk to you about this."

"You don't believe the doctor?"

He snorted. "He and Mrs. Smith have overactive imaginations. They're just being stubborn. They just won't admit the man got drunk and drove off the road. Maybe there is an insurance reason."

I grinned. "You're pretty stubborn yourself. What exactly does the report show?"

He tossed a sheet of paper across the desk. "Read it."

It told me nothing new. "How did you identify him?"

"His wallet, naturally. He had it on him, so don't tell me someone beat him up and sent him over that embankment. If it was a mugging, they would have certainly cleaned out that wallet." He handed me another list. "Here's the stuff we found on him. That wristwatch alone has to be worth two hundred."

I studied the list of Smith's personal effects, held for safekeeping by the police, and could see nothing unusual. He carried the things that most men carried, or so it seemed. Yet I had the feeling some-

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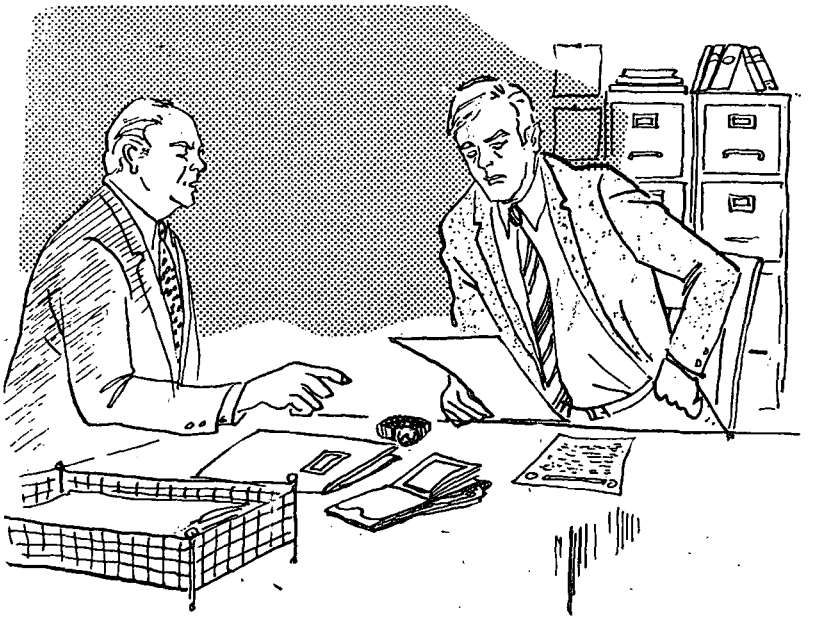

thing was missing. I checked the list again. Nothing clicked so I placed it on Clover's desk and stood up. "You don't mind if I keep checking around?" I asked.

"What are you trying to prove?"

I shrugged. "Don't have the faintest idea, but I do know one thing . . . I believe that doctor, even if you don't."

I left him there, his mouth drawn in a grim line, and headed for the office.

Chetkos listened carefully to what I had to say. "It is your considered opinion that the police are overlooking something?"

"Yes," I said, "but exactly what, I don't know. Mrs. Smith thinks someone tried to kill her husband, but has no idea why or who."

His eyes narrowed. "A woman does not necessarily know everything about her husband. We shall have to look elsewhere."

"The bank?"

"A logical starting point. I suggest you talk to Dick Charleston, who has known John for many years."

At the door, I turned. "You are ready for Cool Papa Benson? I wouldn't want to let him down."

He smiled. "I do not believe we

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need concern ourselves about Mr. Cool Papa. I have an idea."

"I hope so," I said. "Remember, he has a large family to support."

"If I fail, I will personally see that Mr. Cool Papa's family is taken care of."

I whistled softly. "That's a large order. I wish you success."

The bank was only a few blocks from our office building so I decided to walk. As I picked my way through the fog, my mind flicked from the problem of John C. Smith to my own. I had to come up with some way to get back into my wife's good graces without giving her carte blanche over our credit cards and charge accounts or I would be broke before I knew it.

The trouble was that Rhea had never had to watch her spending before. Her father was well-to-do and indulgent, and it had never occurred to him to limit her. After she had become a very popular singer, she'd made more money than she needed and it had all been handled by a manager.

The firm of Chetkos and Stoneman did very well, but not that well. When it came to running up bills, Rhea was in a league of her own.

I stepped carefully around a blind man tapping his way with a cane and turned into the bank entrance. The problem of my free-spending wife would have to wait. It was time again to concentrate on John C. Smith.

Dick Charleston was tall, distinguished looking and seated behind a big desk in the secluded small-loan corner of the bank. If my wife didn't stop spending, I thought wryly, I'd need his professional services. I told him I was investigating the accident for insurance purposes, which sounded reasonable.

"I'm sorry about John," he said. "How did the accident happen?"

"He had too much to drink and ran off the road." Mrs. Smith, the doctor and I might think there was something not quite right about the accident, but there was no use broadcasting it at the moment.

He sat up slowly, "Very unusual," he muttered. "I've never known John to have more than one martini."

Smith's drinking reputation was evidently well established. "He was here late last night?"

"He was here when I left a few minutes after nine."

"Anyone else in the bank?"

"One person, other than the guard." There was a peculiar expression on his face.

"Who was it?"

"Miss Spangler, one of the secretaries."

"She may know when he left. May I talk to her?"

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"Unfortunately, she is not in today."

I couldn't let it end there. "You have Miss Spangler's address? I'll go see her."

"I'm sure we do." He sent one of the women for the address.

"How about the guard?" I asked. "He certainly would know what time Smith left."

He pointed. "That tall one at the door. Jenkins."

"I'll see him on the way out," I said. "Would there be any problem at the bank that might cause Smith to go out and get drunk?"

His eyes widened. "Nothing that is apparent." He thought for a moment. "There is one thing . . ."

I raised my eyebrows at him.

"Perhaps I shouldn't mention it at this time . . ."

"It will come out sooner or later," I said.

"Betty Spangler," he said. "She and John. It was common knowledge in the bank."

Now, that was something Smith's wife didn't know, I thought. The girl brought Betty Spangler's address. Charleston handed it to me. "How long has it been going on?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Months."

"I would think the bank would frown on an office romance."

"They were very discreet during working hours. What they did afterward was their own business. There was really nothing anyone could do. John was the president . . . How do you tell the president you don't approve of his behavior?"

I stood up. "Now that Smith will be out for a while, someone will be taking over for him. Have you started to check his responsibilities yet?"

He looked as if I'd jabbed him with a needle. "What do you mean to infer?"

"I have a suspicious mind," I told him. "The accident seems to be unusual and without reason, yet there must be a reason." I handed him my card. "Call me if you find anything."

I left him staring at me and approached the guard, Jenkins. He'd seen me talking to Charleston and eyed me curiously.

"What time did Mr. Smith leave last night?" I asked him.

"He and Miss Spangler left at nine-thirty."

"This wasn't the first time they left together?"

"Seems to me they always waited until everyone else had gone."

"Mr. Smith was last to leave every night?"

"Every time the bank was open late," he said.

I pondered that. It was a pattern of behavior if someone had been

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watching him, a pattern that could be counted on.

"Any idea of where they were going?"

He shook his head. "They said nothing to me. They never do."

"Anything different about last night? They behaved as usual?"

I could see him straining his memory. "Well . . . usually he gave me his briefcase to hold and Miss Spangler waited until he brought the car around. Last night they just left. They seemed to be in a hurry."

One little thing different, I thought, and it probably meant nothing.

I left the guard and flagged down a cab. The weather hadn't improved any. I gave him the address of Betty Spangler and sat back to think.

The bank had provided one piece of information which might or might not have a bearing, and that was the little side romance Smith had been conducting. That was one visit that hadn't been wasted. I hoped I could say the same about the next.

The cab pulled up in front of an old brownstone that had been converted to apartments. In the vestibule, I found a bell with Betty Spangler's name above it. Several minutes of ringing brought out a suspicious, stout, middle-aged woman who frowned her greeting.

I gave her my most charming smile. "I'm looking for Miss Spangler."

"She's not in."

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

"Not soon, I can tell you that. She was carrying a suitcase when she left this morning. Who are you?"

I used the insurance dodge again. "Just investigating an accident and thought Miss Spangler might be able to help."

She sniffed. "I thought you might be another boyfriend."

My ears perked up. "Another boyfriend? How many does she have?"

"Two that I know of. The older one and the younger one. I guess maybe the younger one won out. He was with her when she left."

"What time did she leave?"

"I usually don't pay too much attention to tenants coming and going, but it sounded as if she had a party in her room last night, then I heard her go out about midnight, come back a few hours later and then leave again. I wondered what was going on so I looked out the window. Must have been three-thirty."

I couldn't resist a smile. "What were you doing up at that hour?"

"I'm a light sleeper and you can't

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be too careful these days." She shrugged. "I decided it was none of my business. Her rent was paid."

"Do you have any idea of where she went and when she'll be back?"

The vestibule door started to close. "I don't care if she never comes back."

She gave me an idea. I put my foot in front of the door. "Did you check her apartment?"

"What for?"

"If she didn't intend to return, the apartment would show it."

"No, I didn't. I don't snoop."

"Maybe you should, this once. After all, if she's not coming back you can rent the apartment immediately." I held a ten-dollar bill so that she could see the corner. "Why don't we take a look?"

The ten talked better than I did. She led the way to the second-floor front apartment. The small room was a shambles. Drawers had been pulled out and left that way. In one corner was a pile of discarded clothing.

The landlady sniffed. "Some people . . ."

I grinned. "Looks like she left in a hurry."

"I thought something was funny when I saw her this morning. If her rent hadn't been paid, I would have stopped her."

There really wasn't much to see. I turned to go when I noticed some colorful brochures crammed into a wastebasket. I pulled them out. They were airline travel folders for South America. Miss Spangler has expensive tastes, I thought. I tucked one into my pocket.

My cab was still waiting. With no further leads and nowhere else to go, I told him to take me back to the office. It was past noon, I was hungry, and I wanted Chetkos' brain to work on the problem.

Chetkos wasn't there and I remembered that he was probably over at City Hall, taking care of Cool Papa Benson.

I settled back behind my desk gratefully. I was tired. I had my secretary send out for a sandwich and a container of coffee, and I started making notes of what I'd learned that morning.

I needed Betty Spangler to help fill in the gap between nine-thirty and one, but where could I find her? Where did the young boyfriend come from and why the sudden departure from the apartment? It all tied together, but nothing could be done about it without Betty Spangler, and I didn't have the faintest idea of where to look for her.

I sighed, bit into my sandwich, put aside the problem of John C. Smith for a time, and went back to

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my own very perplexing situation.

I could call my wife and apologize for our argument but that would be admitting defeat and settling for bigger-than-ever charge account bills. There had to be a diplomatic way out, but the solution was as far from me as the answer to the problem of John C. Smith.

If I was lucky, maybe she'd lose her credit cards.

I put my sandwich down, my appetite suddenly gone, the scene in Clover's office sharp in my memory. I reached for the phone and dialed him. He was in.

"I have some simple questions for you," I said. "You found Smith's wallet. Was his driver's license in it? Did you find any credit cards? Was there a briefcase in the car?"

His voice was puzzled. "Wait until I check."

I held the phone, knowing I was right.

"Nothing here like that," he said. "We noticed the license was missing, but just assumed he left it home. Why?"

"Simple," I said. "You said nothing had been taken from Smith, yet a man like that would almost be certain to carry credit cards and that driver's license is all the identification you need to use them. Do you know what those little pieces of plastic would be worth? Far more than the money in his pocket or his two-hundred-dollar wristwatch. With Smith in the hospital, unable to put a stopper on them, somebody is good for a long free ride. Why they took the briefcase, I don't know, but the guard at the bank said he had one."

"Maybe he didn't have any credit cards."

"His wife could tell us very quickly. She'll be at the hospital."

"I'll call you back," he promised.

I finished my sandwich slowly. I couldn't imagine anyone going out of his way to rob Smith of his credit cards and then trying to kill him, even though stolen credit cards were a big business these days.

The credit card thievery had to be part of something else. I tried to imagine what I'd do if I had taken the cards. Sell them? There was a big market, I knew. Use them? Try to get as much as possible before they appeared on some lost or stolen list? What other reason could there be? And what was in the briefcase worth taking?

The phone rang. It was Clover.

"She says he must have been carrying a half dozen credit cards in a cardcase," he said. "It looks like somebody took them, but what's it mean? It doesn't follow that someone tried to kill him. He could

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have been robbed first, tried to drive home and lost control."

"It's a puzzle," I admitted, "and I don't have the answers yet. I'll call you when I do."

I finished my coffee and sat staring out of the window at the rotten weather. The only thing good about it was that it suited my mood. So far it hadn't been a good day at all.

I twisted around in my chair, trying to get comfortable, when I felt something in my pocket and pulled out the travel folder I'd found in Betty Spangler's room, and studied the colored pictures of lively people enjoying the warm sun. She, at least, would not be bothered by the weather.

Or would she?

I quickly reached for the phone and dialed the office of the airline that had produced the brochure. The sweet young voice at the other end informed me that the heavy fog was still grounding all flights. I grinned. "Do you have a reservation for a John C. Smith?"

"Which flight?"

"Any that goes south."

She left the phone to look it up.

"Mr. Smith is registered on our seven o'clock flight," she said finally.

"It hasn't left yet?"

"Not yet."

"Any idea of when it will finally be able to leave?" I asked.

"No, sir," she said. "There is no sign of the weather breaking."

I felt much better. I hung up and dialed Clover again. "Meet me at the airport with a couple of men. I may have an answer." I didn't even give him a chance to ask me what it was all about.

I got my car and worked my way through the slow-moving traffic to the airport. The terminal was jammed with people, some even stretched out on the floor in out-of-the-way corners, trying to sleep. It was a scene that was probably repeated at every major airline terminal along the east coast.

Clover, having the benefits of siren and flashing red lights, was there before me. "This had better be a worthwhile trip, Stoneman."

"It should be," I said. "We have a John C. Smith with a reservation on the seven o'clock flight south. He's still here because the planes are all grounded. I'd like to see what he looks like."

"You dragged me down here for that? John C. Smith is a very common name. He could be some perfectly innocent citizen, not somebody using a stolen credit card."

"Could you let it go without checking it out?"

He shrugged. "I guess not. Where will we find him?"

"In this mess, I thought we'd

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have the girl at the ticket counter page him."

"What does he look like?"

"I don't know, except that he'll be young and probably have an attractive girl with him."

"Let's get it over with," he said resignedly.

He showed the girl at the airlines ticket counter his identification and she began to page John C. Smith.

Three of them showed up. The first was legitimate, an elderly gentleman on his way to Florida to get away from the weather. The next was a crank, a middle-aged man whose identification said his name was Campbell. When he wouldn't give an explanation as to why he claimed he was John C. Smith, Clover took him into custody.

The third was pay dirt.

I was standing to one side, away from the crowd, when I saw him; young, with long hair, a closely-trimmed beard and a briefcase under his arm. Clinging to him was a young blonde, carrying a suitcase. She was wearing an initialed pin on her coat with the initials ES.

Elizabeth Spangler, I thought. Betty Spangler.

The young man moved forward hesitantly. You could see he was wondering why John C. Smith was being paged and whether he should answer the call.

Something, perhaps the sight of Clover, who had been a cop so long it was easy to see he was one, made him turn around and start edging away.

Clover was no fool. He'd been studying the crowd, too. He saw the couple and came to the same conclusion that I had.

"One minute!" he called.

The couple bolted.

In that crowd, they were going nowhere. As they passed, I stuck out a foot, tripping the man and catapulting him into the girl. They both went down.

Clover stood above them. "They're the ones we're looking for?"

"They ran," I said. "See if he has Smith's credit cards on him."

He had.

I followed Clover back to headquarters. He let me sit in on the questioning of the young man, whose name was Mowbray, and then the interview with Betty Spangler.

The stories they told were much the same.

"Book them," said Clover finally. He turned to me. "You and the doctor were right and I was wrong, Stoneman. I owe you a favor."

I grinned. "Don't think I won't collect someday."

The fog was still bad as I drove

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slowly back to the office. Chetkos was behind his big desk, looking pleased with himself, and I knew that somehow he'd managed to get Cool Papa Benson off.

He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands over his stomach. "You have that peculiar expression that comes from having too many martinis or doing something well, Mr. Stoneman. Which is it?"

"I have not had a martini all day," I protested. "On the other hand, I have achieved some small success in the matter of John C. Smith."

He stared up at me from beneath his shaggy white brows, waiting.

"First, your friend John C. Smith is in trouble," I said. "He lifted a briefcase full of negotiable securities left at the bank as collateral for loans."

The eyebrows went up. "For what purpose?"

"To finance a trip to South America for himself and a young lady friend he acquired at the bank. They were supposed to leave early this morning on the seven o'clock flight."

"Something changed their plans?"

"The young lady had no intention of going. With him, anyway. She already had a boyfriend named Mowbray whom she preferred."

He sighed. "Tell me the entire story."

I looked around the office. "I do not have the proper background."

"Background?"

"It is a story that should be told to the sad sighing of violins and the wailing of woodwinds."

Chetkos groaned. "Spare me the dramatics and tell it simply. What happened?"

"The young lady's name is Betty Spangler. She and John C. Smith became very cozy, deliberately on her part because she was prompted by her boyfriend. It was his idea that she get John C. to leave his wife and home and flee with her to some lush spot where they could be alone together. To finance the trip, John C. would require money, which they would take away from him. They thought he had it in his personal account, but he didn't."

"Evidently *his* wife also likes to charge things," he needled.

I ignored him. "John C. decided to steal the securities from the bank."

"Miss Spangler must be a very persuasive young woman."

"I have seen her," I said. "She has the physical attributes that will also persuade an excellent attorney to represent her, an otherwise sensible jury perhaps to acquit her and an equally sensible judge to give her a light sentence if they do not.

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Be that as it may, John C. is not the first middle-aged man to lose his head over a young woman and do something stupid."

"I cannot argue the point," he said. "Continue."

"As I said, the plan was to leave last night. John C. took the securities, knowing they were as good as money, and he and the girl left the bank. I suppose he had some story for his wife as to why he wouldn't be home, but he never got to tell it. When they got to her apartment, Mowbray was waiting. He took the briefcase from Smith and was very surprised to find securities instead of cash. Not being mature enough financially to appreciate what he had, he became angry and proceeded to beat Smith senseless before the girl could stop him.

"After she explained that the securities were valuable but would have to be converted, he calmed down somewhat, but that didn't solve much. They still wanted to get out of town, but they had no ready cash. What little there was in Smith's wallet wasn't enough."

"A dilemma they must have solved," murmured Chetkos.

"The only things Smith had that they could use were his credit cards, so they took those. They figured the credit cards would not only buy plane tickets, but also let them rent a car and get them into the finest hotels and restaurants in the world. All of a sudden they realized they didn't need any money. All they needed were the credit cards and his driver's license for identification. They could travel first class until they cashed the securities."

"Fantastic," said Chetkos. "The thought would never have occurred to me."

"They also decided it would be a waste not to use the plane reservation Smith had already made. After all, the airline did not know John C. Smith. They had one more problem, however. What to do with John C.? They couldn't leave him in the apartment. That would tie him in with the Spangler girl. Nor could they leave him just anywhere. He might recover and tell the police and the police would be looking for them, so Mowbray came up with the brilliant idea of pouring him full of liquor and sending his car over the embankment, with the expectation that Smith would probably be killed or, at the very least, seriously injured."

"John was lucky. They could have disposed of him."

"That would have led right back to the girl. No, they wanted it to look like an accident, another drunk-driving accident, and they almost got away with it. If it

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hadn't been for Mrs. Smith and her doubts . . ."

"You puzzled all this out?" asked Chetkos wonderingly.

"Not all," I admitted. "Only that they might use the credit cards for a plane trip out of town. One thing they hadn't counted on was the fog grounding all flights. If the planes had been flying, they would have been long gone and I doubt if anyone would have caught them."

"Poor John," he said. "He'll have to answer for taking those securities."

"Worse than that. He'll have to answer to his wife. After all, the securities have been recovered." I started out of the office.

"You are not interested in a minor situation like Mr. Cool Papa?" he asked.

I sighed. "If I don't ask, I'm sure you'll tell me. What happened?"

"Nothing much. I arranged for Mr. Cool Papa's children to be in the courtroom."

I gaped. "All fifteen of them?"

"Including the babe in arms. When the lady witness saw what havoc her testimony could cause an innocent family, it was easy to get her to admit she could have been mistaken."

Thinking of those fifteen children lined up in court, I chuckled and walked out. Leave it to Chetkos. Cool Papa's family picture would probably make the evening editions.

As I reached my office, the phone rang. It was my wife.

"John?" Her voice was soft.

I held my breath. "Yes."

"I thought you'd like to know," she said sweetly. "I just conducted a little ceremony."

"What kind of ceremony?" I asked cautiously.

"I destroyed my copies of all our credit and charge account cards," she said.

I sat stunned.

"All of them," she said firmly. "Every one. I couldn't let those monstrous little pieces of plastic come between us. Do you approve?"

"Stay right where you are," I said happily. "I'm coming home right now to show you how much I approve."

Downstairs in the florist's shop, I carefully selected a dozen yellow roses.

"Shall I charge them to your account, Mr. Stoneman?" asked the florist.

I nodded, guiltily reaching for a credit card.

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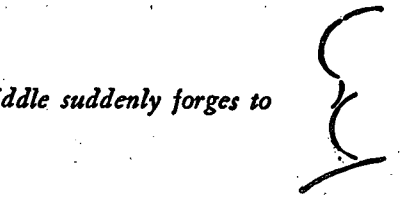
In some instances, the role of second fiddle suddenly forges to preeminence.



The Second Bird

MORGAN FINISHED his morning swim with five brisk laps, left the pool and flopped into a reclining chair. The climbing California sun warmed his wide chest and flat belly, and he breathed savoringly of the fragrant air that sifted up from the lemon valley into the motel area. He felt alive and vibrant which, he thought with a wry chuckle, was a good feeling for a dead man.

Morgan was a killer. He used the garrote, was silent, swift and accomplished. He had grown up in New York City and in his fourteenth year he had killed his first human being. Since then, he had killed nine men and two women, had been arrested but never convicted of a crime. He was cold-blooded, patient and feared. He had earned the reputation that made others tremble when they found themselves forced into a car with him. He had never been convicted because he had worked for the organization, and the organization protected its own, provided alibis, money and vacations, and bought, traded with or bulldozed the police, district attorneys, judges, and whoever else it took. Too, all of his victims had been people the police, district attorneys and judges wanted dead anyway.

It had been a beautiful setup for Morgan through the years. He had

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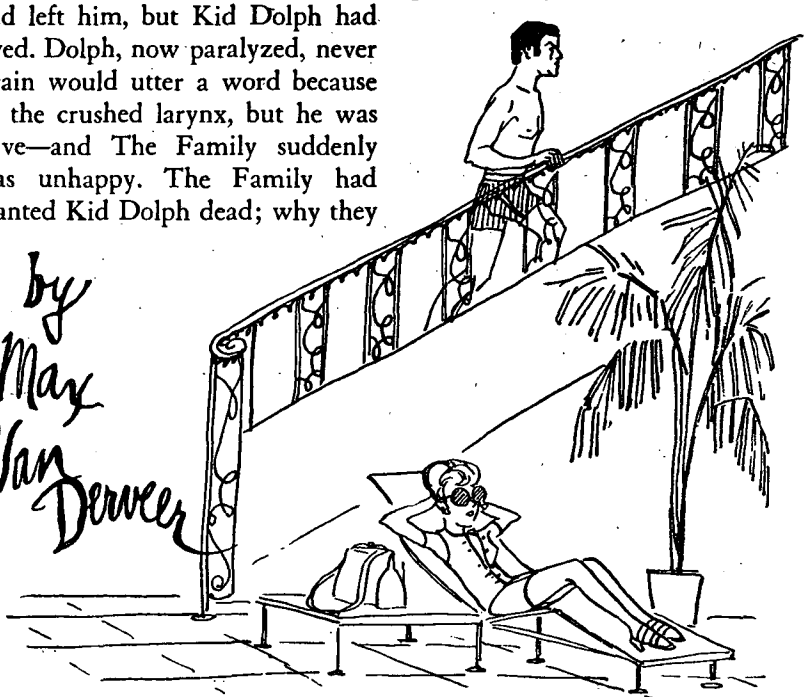
lived quietly and handsomely, was recognized in the organization. He was not awarded a true niche in The Family, of course, but he had had his corner, he had been valuable property, he was feared. To be feared was the key to the door of personal success and balm to his ego. Thus, the fact that it all had ended because of a tough nut named Kid Dolph—a nobody whose neck muscles had to be constructed of steel cables—made the end difficult to accept. Kid Dolph should have died. Morgan had thought Kid Dolph dead when he had left him, but Kid Dolph had lived. Dolph, now paralyzed, never again would utter a word because of the crushed larynx, but he was alive—and The Family suddenly was unhappy. The Family had wanted Kid Dolph dead; why they had wanted him dead was not important.

What was important to Morgan was his own future. Only thirty-three, he was far too young to have dirt shoveled onto his face, or sink into a swamp, or know the searing of hell-on-earth in some furnace—so he had bolted. He had run fast, but crooked as a mountain road. He had dodged, darted, backtracked all across the country. Then he had found the small California town with a fancy motel on a state highway that had been superseded by an Interstate three

by Max Van Derwer



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miles to the east and he finally had felt safe enough to catch his breath.

Seven weeks had passed since the bus had dropped him and all was quiet. He was gaining new confidence with each rising of the sun. He had either eluded The Family—the killers who were now seeking *him*—or The Family had not bothered to give chase. He could not accept the latter. Deep inside, he knew he was a dead man in certain eyes. The Family did not accept sloppiness, which made for a loose organization, and organization was how The Family existed. So it was a matter of cunning and camouflage now. He had to remain slippery and hidden to keep breathing. Too, there was another worry; he was running out of money.

To Morgan, the only way to live was with money. Oh, he could provide bread and shelter by occasionally knocking off a liquor store, a gas station, or conning a dame—the birds went for him—but the big money, the kind of money he needed to feel truly comfortable, was in the banks and armored cars and gambling casinos, and in being paid to kill people. He didn't know the first thing about knocking over a bank, it usually took an army to heist an armored car, the guy who cleaned out a casino was a dead man—he already had that problem—and he didn't know anyone who wanted another person killed, so Morgan was a disturbed man as he sat by the quiet motel pool this beautiful morning in late June.

"Good morning again, lover," said the low voice behind him, and Morgan smiled.

Marvel Johnson had been a find. She had checked into the motel in his third week, having rolled in off the highway in a sports heap that was shiny new and loaded with gear. She had been put in the second-floor room next to his because it was the last available room on that given day. She did not like being on the second floor, but Morgan felt safer where he could look down on people. She had remained, though, and no longer complained, because she now thought herself in love with Morgan.

Marvel was an upstate schoolteacher who finally had decided, after eight years of Dullsville, to live a little. So she had taken accumulated savings, borrowed more money, purchased the sports car and bright clothing and had headed out for a summer of fun and games in Mexico City. Then she had run into Morgan by chance selection of motel, been swept off her feet—partly because the new car and new clothing had fooled him into believing she was a wealthy young lady—and now had

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settled into the fun and games of a small-town motel, still in California.

Morgan liked her. She was a girl of young animation, very blue eyes and bronze-colored hair that had orange sparkles in it in the sunlight. He had found her to be a swinger even if she wasn't rich. She was carrying approximately $2,150 in cash and it was all she had in the world, but she was going to blow it. She was living! Morgan agreed with her that it was the thing to do, but he was also harboring the thought of stealing her cash and moving on. Except where would he go? He was learning to feel secure right where he was, disliked the idea of going out into the world again, exposing himself to unfriendly eyes.

"My coffee was delicious," said Marvel, taking the reclining chair beside him, settling with a sigh and patting her flat tummy. She wore a green sunsuit this morning which enhanced the color of her hair and her suntanned skin. She turned large round yellow sunglasses toward him. "And your swim?" she questioned.

"Great," he chuckled.

Marvel was a coffee girl in the mornings; he was a swimmer.

"Did your friend find you?" she asked.

The icy wind that swept Morgan jarred him but he thought he managed to retain an exterior calm. "Who?"

Marvel sat up and looked around the vacant pool area. "He stopped me while I was on my way to the coffee shop," she said. "He was in the lobby area, and he wanted to know where he could find you. I thought it rather strange that he knew you were here, that he would ask me about you—after all, he was a total stranger to *me*—but on the other hand, I don't know that much about you, Morgan, and I thought . . . Well, I thought he might be a business acquaintance . . ." She paused, frowned. "Or something," she finished lamely. "Wasn't I supposed to tell him you were out here at the pool? You look unhappy with me, darling."

Morgan felt terribly exposed, wondered if he were in the sight of a high-powered rifle this very instant. "Did the man give you a name?" he asked.

"Morgan, you are upset with me! I'm sorry!"

"A name?" Morgan probed patiently.

Not that the name really mattered, but some killers had quirks, specialties, and, through the years, names became linked with those quirks, specialties. It might or might not be a good thing to have an idea of how he was to die. Still,

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if he knew the method of execution there was just an outside chance he could escape . . .

"I thought it a very odd name," said Marvel. "In fact, I still think he may have been putting me on. He said his name is Jelly. What kind of a name is that?"

Morgan had never heard of a man named Jelly.

"Who *is* he, Morgan?" Marvel said suddenly, sitting up on the edge of the chair. She looked worried.

"A bookmaker," lied Morgan, attempting to be casual as he left his chair. He found himself drawing on all of his steel nerves. For some reason he could not explain to himself, he did not want to be smacked down here in front of her. "I owe him money."

"I don't know anything about bookmakers," she faltered. "How much . . . do you owe this man?"

"Around $3,000."

"And you've been hiding from him here?"

"In a sense. Mostly, I've been trying to figure a way to put the money together. But it's not your concern, doll. I'll go up to my room. Perhaps Jelly went there to wait for me. I'll reason with him. Sometimes he is a reasonable man."

"And if he is not reasonable?"

Marvel looked terribly frightened and Morgan attempted to turn on a grin for her. "You can't get water out of a dry well."

"You can have my money," she said abruptly. "I don't have $3,000, but I have enough, perhaps, to satisfy him for a little while. Then we can work out how we'll get the rest of it."

He turned from her. He was ice inside, had no sensation of moving, no feeling anywhere in his body. "You sit tight. Right here at the pool," he told her. He didn't want her next door when he was cut down. He didn't want her to hear the shot. "Jelly will reason."

Running was out. For one thing, he was in bathing trunks. For another, there were hidden eyes on him; he could feel them. All he had to do was take a step in the wrong direction and he was dead. For a third, he preferred to die in semiprivacy.

Morgan felt a glimmer of hope as he went up the outside Spanish staircase to the second floor. Had he ever eluded these people? He knew he had not. They had not *found* him. They'd had him within touch ever since Kid Dolph, could have killed him at any instant, but they had not. Why? Had he somehow won an unexpected reprieve? Was Jelly here to tell him to return to New York, that the miss of Kid Dolph was not the end of the world? Did New York have an-

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other job lined up for him? Did New York need his special talent? Was *that* why Jelly had appeared?

Morgan took a deep breath and entered the room. Somehow he now did not expect a gun blast, the splattering of his eyes and brains.

Jelly was what he had anticipated: a man of thirty years perhaps, neat, conservatively dressed, and at ease in the chair near the back-wall window. That window looked out on a slanted red roof and a short drop to a parking area behind the motel, giving a man a second route of escape—except that now there was no escape.

Jelly nodded. His eyes were dark; for a second or two they inventoried with interest, and then they went dead again. He said, "We're bringing a man in here this afternoon, around four o'clock. He will be in unit seven, ground floor, this side. You can check out the location later. We don't want the man to leave the motel. He's of no use to us anymore. He has a flabby mouth, no guts. There's a reasonable fee for you, in Seattle. After, you go to Seattle, telephone Blinky. You are acquainted with Blinky. He will have your money and a ship ticket. You're going to Alaska for the summer. There's a car downstairs for you. Look out this window and you can see it. It's the green sedan. It's a stolen heap, and those Alabama plates are stolen. You can leave the car with Blinky. Here are the keys."

Jelly tossed the keys without moving from the chair, and Morgan caught them deftly. He was puzzled. "I'm off the hook?"

Jelly shrugged. "I don't know if you ever were on, pal." He left the chair without change of expression. "Be at the swimming pool at four o'clock. Be alone, not with the redhead. A dark-haired girl will contact you after she has checked in with the man. She'll set him up for you. It's to be quiet, no fuss. Do your job and check out. No one will find him before tomorrow morning."

Jelly went to the door, then stopped suddenly and turned. "By the way," he said, "how is the redhead?"

Morgan said nothing.

Jelly shrugged again. "Well, she looks choice."

Then he was gone.

Morgan was suspicious, tense. He could smell cunningness. A nameless man was to die by his hand—and then *he* was to die; two birds with one stone. It was Family thinking. So now he had to scheme. Fleeing at the moment was impossible. He would be watched throughout the day. Not by Jelly, certainly. He probably never would see Jelly again, but

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there were eyes at the motel. Of that he was sure. So running still was out. He wouldn't get two steps.

The provided car was out, too. Morgan went to the window and looked down on the glistening top of the green sedan. He felt as if he were staring at a bomb. The instant he switched on the ignition that green car could blow up in his face. He tossed the keys on his bed and turned to stare at the door. Vividly, he remembered a civil rights leader who had stepped from a motel unit in Memphis.

He left the unit. He did not fear walking out of the door this moment; it would not be dangerous until after four o'clock in the afternoon. He went down the stairway slowly, his mind churning. He would kill the nameless man. That decision alone was worth life until at least a few minutes after four o'clock. And then?

He had to have Marvel's sports car, of course. It was his lone, swift escape. If he could just get his hands on the wheel and get out on the highway, he knew he would again be temporarily safe. He could gain the inch of time he so desperately needed. If he could get out of town without being killed, get on the road, then he had a second chance to survive. Worrying about the future could come later.

Yet Marvel's heap could be bombed, too. There were no rules of the game that said only one car could be rigged. It was a new problem, something else to stew about. Or was it?

He stopped with the new thought, and brightened. Now he hoped fervently that Marvel's car would be rigged. The explosion would draw a crowd, and crowds were the best place in the world in which to get lost.

Marvel still sat on the edge of the pool chair, her knees high and clamped together, and her fingers interlocked in her lap. She seemed on the verge of explosion, so he said, "I got more time, honey. Jelly isn't pressing as hard as I thought he might. But I want to get away from here, go to another town, lose him. I don't like the pressing."

"Do we go now?" she asked.

"Is your car gassed?"

"Almost a full tank."

"Perhaps you should go on to Mexico City. This is my affair. I got myself into it and—"

"No!"

"Okay, doll, then here's how it's to be. At three-thirty this afternoon you go to your unit and pack. I want your car packed in thirty minutes. At precisely four o'clock I want you to start the motor and pull up behind unit seven. Keep the car motor running, but you

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slide over into the passenger seat. When I join you, I'll want to drive. Questions?"

"A million!"

"Save them until tomorrow."

"Well . . . all right, if you say so, but—"

"Tomorrow."

"Gee, this all sounds so mysterious!"

"Fun and games, baby, remember?"

"Fun and games," she said enthusiastically. "And until three-thirty this afternoon?"

Morgan attempted to relax in the chair even though he might have just set up Marvel Johnson for death. He grinned, said, "Go put on your bikini. We'll enjoy a day in the sun."

It was exactly five minutes before four o'clock when Morgan saw the dark-haired girl come around a corner unit and move toward the crowded pool apron. He still was in his bathing suit, having decided to leave behind everything except his wallet and his garrote. When he went to unit seven, he would be just another swimmer leaving the pool area. If he were killed, it would not matter what he wore when he died. If he escaped with Marvel, she would buy clothing for him. If she blew up in her car, he expected to be able to light out on foot and he would secrete himself until night, then break into a clothing store and outfit himself.

The girl was young, cute, dark and diminutive, with brilliant dark hair and eyes, and wore a bright, multi-colored peasant dress with a hemline that just barely got down on her thighs. She walked freely, as if she did not have a care in the world, but it was a practiced walk, and Morgan recognized it. He briefly wondered who had conned her into this venture. It was a certainty he did not give two hoots for her life; she had been thrust into the big league.

The girl passed a room key into Morgan's hand and smiled, revealing flashing white teeth. "He's taking a shower," she said.

Then she was gone, and Morgan watched her walk on around the pool and into a parking area, her young hips swaying and her dark legs glittering in the sunlight. She got into a car that already was occupied by two men, the car backed away and drove out of the motel complex.

Poor, stupid little girl, Morgan thought in one of his rare moments of compassion. The girl was in big league hands, all right, and soon those hands would be pitching her into the sea. Her destiny was rocks and water and the nibbling of fish on her flesh. One less voice to mouth a confession under pressing

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circumstances—should pressing circumstances develop.

Morgan put on his beach jacket. He had three minutes, and he walked swiftly to unit seven, opened the door and stepped inside. He stood then, braced against the door, blinking his eyes against the air-conditioned dimness of the room. The bathroom door was three-quarters closed. He could see steam against the light in the bathroom and he could hear a man splashing in pounding water, but his attention had been drawn to a small open case on the double bed. The case was filled with money, stacks of fresh green bills. He stepped over to the bed. Each of the banded stacks had a $50 bill showing. He did not touch the money or the case. He was puzzled. Was this sucker in the shower on the run? Had he cleaned out a safe at a cute dark-haired girl's bidding? But why was the case open? Why was the money there, just for the taking? Why hadn't the girl walked out of the door with the case in hand? She, certainly, knew she was never to see the man again.

There was only one answer, of course. The girl had not known about the money. She had left the unit and the guy had stepped out of the shower. For some reason no one ever was to know, he had padded out into the main room, found the girl temporarily departed, then had put the case on the bed and opened it. To surprise and impress the girl when she returned? That had to be it! The guy was a nut, but he wanted to impress, so he was turning this little trick on the girl. It would make him a large man in her black eyes; very large.

It was four o'clock, straight up, and there had not been an explosion outside. Morgan went to a point beside the back wall and risked a quick twitch of the drawn drapery to look outside. The sports heap was there in the drive, exhaust puffing, Marvel sitting on the passenger side and moving around nervously.

He would dive through the window. That seemed his lone chance of survival, now that Marvel Johnson and her car had remained intact. He would dive to present the minimum of target. He would hit the ground, roll and scramble between other parked cars. If he could flag Marvel down to him amidst the rifle shots, if she was not mesmerized or cut down in the first thirty seconds, he might be able to leap into her car and streak away. If she became paralyzed or dead, he could run. There was no other escape.

"Hey!"

The rough voice startled Morgan

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and he whirled. The man was old and plump and wrinkled in his dripping skin. Behind him, the noise of the shower continued.

Morgan stepped into the old man and shot a looping fist low against the fat body. The old man gasped and jackknifed. Morgan was at his best now, all other things forgotten. A head and neck were exposed. He swished the garrote from the pocket of his beach jacket and looped it with the efficiency of a practiced hangman over the bald head. The fat man lunged with the bite of the rope. Morgan stuck out a foot and kicked the fat man's feet out from under him. The fat man twisted violently in his stumble and then hung himself while Morgan held him fast. Morgan went down with the fat man, jammed a knee against the flabby chest and continued to use the strength of his killer hands. The fat man flopped for a few seconds and then went limp. Morgan continued to tighten the garrote. No more Kid Dolphs for him. The fat man was to die, for sure.

Finally, Morgan pocketed the garrote and stood staring at the open case on the bed. His breathing had quickened slightly and his blood ran fast. Perhaps the money now was his out. Perhaps he could wave it in an open doorway, display it in a window, either window, front or back. Perhaps a sniper would become temporarily mystified and relax from his rifle sight. Morgan needed only an instant, just that fraction of a second to make himself a weaving and difficult target. So he got a slug in an arm or a leg? An arm or leg wound did not make him dead, and if just an ounce of luck was riding with him he could keep moving, even with the wound.

No! His best chance still was in the dive through the back window, the dive, the roll, the scramble; Marvel and her car—but that was a tremendous amount of money to be leaving behind.

He went to the bed and snapped down the lid of the money case—and in that one-half, blinding, orange second, that one-half second just before the sledgehammer force jammed his chest and split his face, that one-half second when he realized that a bomb had been unwittingly activated by a dark-haired girl who soon would be fish food, in that one-half second Morgan knew the second bird was to die—and only one stone had been thrown, after all.

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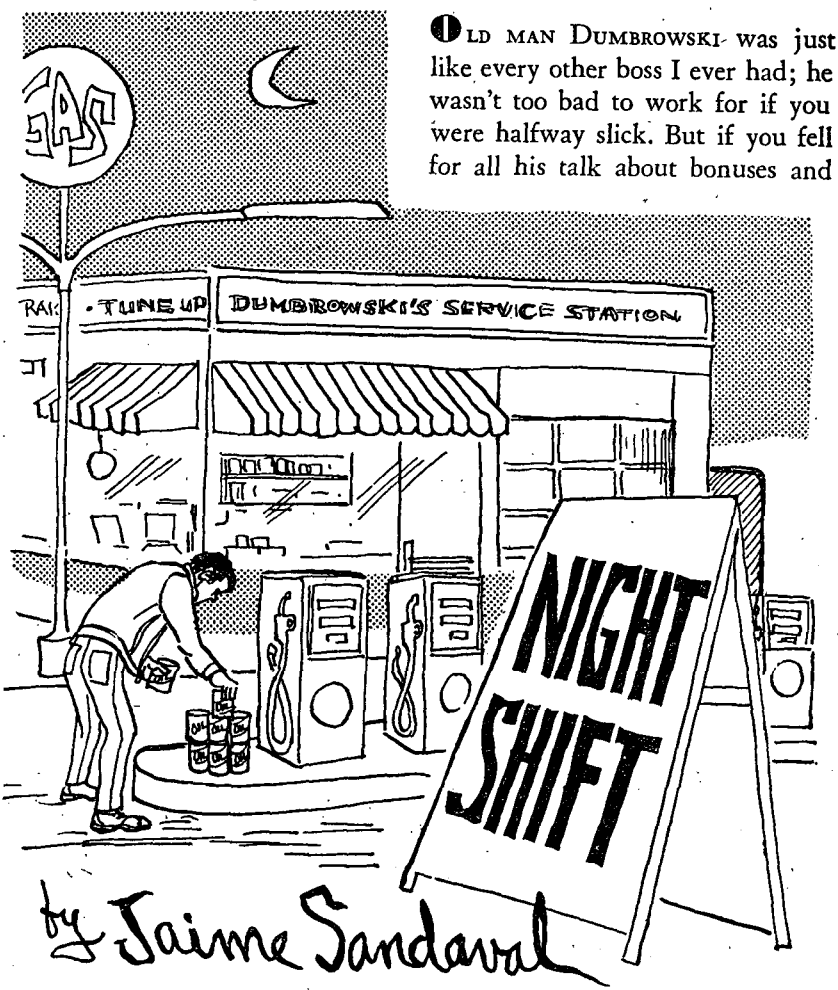
Businessmen who bemoan the lack of "help" may have something for which to be grateful.



OLD MAN DUMBROWSKI was just like every other boss I ever had; he wasn't too bad to work for if you were halfway slick. But if you fell for all his talk about bonuses and

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profit-sharing, and listened to him call you "son" and believe he meant it, you'd be in trouble.

Not that he didn't hand out extra money three or four times a year and invite me and the other guys who ran the service station to dinner a couple of times a month, but I wasn't about to fall for his big-happy-family line, delivered in broken English. No, sir, not me.

Besides, I didn't need him to give me a bonus. Every job I ever had, I arranged my own bonuses. I was an expert at arranging private bonuses long before I answered the newspaper ad for a night attendant at Dumbrowski's Service Station.

As always, within a week of taking the job I had the operation down cold and was finding ways to siphon some of the cream off the top. In fact, I was so good at it I had to slow it down. A couple of months after I went to work for him, when Dumbrowski handed out the bonus envelopes, the other attendants complained privately that they were surprisingly thin. Even Dumbrowski wore an expression that was both puzzled and apologetic. It was so funny I nearly laughed in their faces, but I reduced the amount of my "private" bonus. No use spoiling a good thing.

The service station was on the main highway, about a half mile outside of town. The grease racks and repair bays were closed at night, but it was my job to take care of the customers at the two gas islands.

So from eight at night till four in the morning, I pumped fuel, poured oil, and washed windshields for an almost unbroken stream of cars. The station was near enough to the city to get a lot of the local trade and far enough out to catch the traveling salesmen and the tourists who were bypassing the city traffic.

It was usually only near the end of my shift that I was able to slow down a bit. Then, while I washed the blacktop down with a hose, freshening up the place, I had time to figure out how much money I'd made outsmarting old man Dumbrowski and the fools who drove in every night. I always had a good feeling then. It was the best part of the day.

Any night I came to work I followed a set routine. I always arrived a few minutes before eight and took pump-meter readings, and an inventory of the oil cans stacked beside the pumps, with the middle-shift head attendant who was going off duty. Then I waited while he removed everything except change and ten singles from the islands' cash drawer, put it in an envelope, and dropped it

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through a slot in the big office safe.

My shift had officially begun.

Once in a while one of the guys would stay over to work on his own car, but usually they cleared out of there as though the last man away from the station would be penalized. When everyone was gone, I reached behind the front covers on the gas pumps with a long, thin screwdriver and turned each meter back twenty gallons.

Eight pumps equaled a hundred and sixty gallons.

At first I'd turned them back forty each, but that was before I'd nearly wiped out Dumbrowski's bonuses. When I had the pump meters reset, I wiped clean a couple dozen empty cans of expensive oil and refilled them with bulk oil from a barrel inside the station. Then I brought them out and stacked them on an island and covered them with full cans of expensive oil, but in a position where I could put my hand on them without even looking at them.

Finally, I got my box of gas caps from my car and placed it near the credit card machine on the island nearest the building. I was ready for business.

The preparations took a few minutes, and I had to do it between waiting on customers, but I never begrudged the hustling I had to do. Since the first twenty gallons from each pump were mine, I was working one hundred percent for myself. After the first twenty gallons were gone, I figured I was working about seventy-five percent for old man Dumbrowski and twenty-five percent for me. This still wasn't bad, but each week my paycheck was by far the smallest part of my weekly income.

I couldn't keep it up indefinitely, of course. There is a lot of shrinkage in gas, but not that much shrinkage. Sooner or later either Dumbrowski or the area manager was going to catch on to the fact they were being milked. You develop a sixth sense about those things. The day I saw them sticking the tanks with a long, gallonage measuring pole any time before the bulk truck was expected, that day I blew town.

But it was always great while it lasted. I had everything down to a science. If customers pulled too far past the pump and stayed in their cars and couldn't read the meter, I always gave them less than they asked for or charged them more than the meter recorded. This helped to make up some of the shortage I was creating and prolonged my stay.

That system always worked especially well with women. They were usually far more concerned with how clean I got their car windows,

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and I always worked on their windows until they shone. Most days I'd have a couple dozen women I'd make gas money on, and a lot of men, too.

The oil was almost as profitable. I sold bulk oil at high-grade prices as often as I could. I had a trick of keeping a finger on the dipstick so it couldn't go in all the way. I could make any engine seem to be a quart low on oil. Then if I wasn't watched too closely I could even sell an empty can. I usually saved this trick for the customers who stepped out as soon as the cars stopped rolling and headed for the rest rooms.

My favorite piece of business, though, was with the gas caps. There wasn't too much money in it, but they all fell for it, yokels and smart guys alike. I'd wait for an expensive-looking car with out-of-state plates to pull into an island. When I removed the gas cap, I'd slip it into a pocket of my coveralls.

Then I'd walk around to the front window. "Say, mister," I'd say, real serious-like, "have you noticed you're not getting the gas mileage you should?"

"Why, yes," they always said; did you ever know anyone who was satisfied with his gas mileage? "Now that you mention it, I've noticed that." I never had one refuse the bait, whether he was driving a foreign bug or an expensive limousine.

"Well, sir, they must've forgotten to replace or to tighten your gas cap at the last place you stopped. It's gone, and you've been losing gas ever since. I'll bet you lose a gallon every twenty or thirty miles. It gets sucked out the filler neck when you tramp on the accelerator."

"Can you sell me a new one?"

"Sorry, sir, the station doesn't stock gas caps, but I may have a used one of my own I can let you have."

Then I'd dig around in my box of gas caps until I found one that fit the car and screwed it tightly in place after filling the gas tank. I not only got a couple of dollars for the cap on the average, but I'd often get a tip, too. As soon as the car was out of sight, I'd take its gas cap from my pocket and drop it into the box with the others so I'd be ready to sell it to the next sucker who came along.

That's the way my shifts always went. I pumped gas, poured oil, cleaned windows, and sold gas caps. I was courteous and I kept smiling. I moved a lot faster than most attendants. And why not? It was almost like having my own business, so I didn't mind working hard. From the time I arrived until two-thirty or three in the morning,

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when things began to slow down, I was on the go steadily.

I was hosing down the blacktop early one morning when two kids drove in. They were wild-looking hippie types with hair well down below their shoulders, and they had a beat-up old convertible with dented fenders and a blown muffler. They sat there VROOM-VROOMing the engine until I dropped the hose and walked over to their car. I knew the type. They'd want a dollar or two in gas, and there was no way I could make a nickel off them.

"Two bucks' worth of gas—regular," the kid behind the wheel said. "And check the oil." His partner on the front seat gave me a sarcastic grin.

I raised the hood and gave the dipstick a wipe with my rag. There was no sense in making the level seem lower than it was, so I measured it accurately and showed the mark to the driver. "You're not quite a quart down," I told him.

He waved me away. I heard one of them laugh while I was replacing the dipstick, but I didn't pay much attention to it. I lowered the hood and went to the rear of the car and began pumping the two dollars' worth of gas. The driver watched the meter all the while to be sure I gave him every ounce.

I was about to hang the hose back on the pump when I noticed that several cans of the expensive oil were missing. I could tell because I could see the tops of some of the used cans I'd filled with bulk oil, and I always kept them buried. The kid on the passenger's side of the convertible had fished the cans of expensive oil into the car while I was bent under the hood.

I walked around to the driver's side with the gas hose and tapped the side of the car with the nozzle. "The oil," I said. "Put it back."

"We don't know what you're talking about," the driver said, and gave me a grin that matched his partner's.

I hate wise guys. I mean I really despise them.

"Put the cans back," I said.

The kid at the wheel spit casually. It flew close to me. The one sitting beside him blew smoke in the direction of my face. Both pretended I wasn't there.

"One last time. Put the cans back."

"Let's get out an' stomp this insinuatin' type," the driver drawled. They opened the car doors.

It was supposed to scare me.

I shoved the gas nozzle into the front seat and pulled the lever. A jet of orange fuel gushed out, drenching both kids. The one on the passenger's side yelled in surprise. The cigarette fell from his

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open mouth in a shower of sparks, and the car went up like a bomb. I barely got away from it with my own eyebrows unsinged.

The two kids died where they sat, with seven cans of the station's best oil at their feet.

After that there were sirens and flashing lights, blue-uniformed police and white-coated ambulance attendants. Photographers scrambled around, taking pictures from every conceivable angle while the charred bodies were slipped into plastic bags.

I told the cops how it happened. The kids had stolen the oil and given me an argument about it. I'd gotten so mad while I was telling them to replace the oil that I'd inadvertently squeezed the gas nozzle lever and drenched them with gasoline. Of course it was a terribly unfortunate accident that a lighted cigarette had turned them into flaming torches.

Nobody doubted it.

They told me I'd probably have to appear at the inquest, and turned me loose.

Dumbrowski was at the station by that time, so I told him how it happened. "If there's anything I hate, it's a thief," I added.

"That's right," Dumbrowski said. "While you were answering the cops' questions, I had your relief check out your drawer."

I suddenly remembered I hadn't had time to remove the extra cash I accumulated last night from the cash drawer. For the first time since I'd been working for Dumbrowski he didn't look stupid. I saw him draw his big fist back, then POW! I didn't see anything.

I came to with the relief man hosing me down as I lay on the blacktop. "The old man says get lost," he told me, and punctuated it with his work boot in my ribs. That was for his reduced bonus envelopes during my stay at the station.

I got lost.

The devil of it was, I hadn't milked the Dumbrowski station of half its potential.

How do you like those two smart-aleck kids coming along and lousing up a good thing like that for me?

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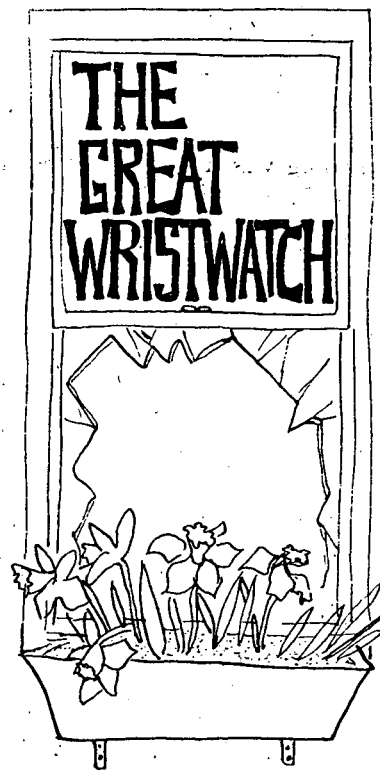
A little "hair of the dog" is oft, of course, a thought-provoking stimulant.



THE GREAT WRISTWATCH ROBBERY

by Leo P. Kelley

"OH, YOU poor dear thing!" exclaimed Miss Croydon, the head nurse, as she came into Dan Riley's room and found him bound and gagged and struggling to free himself.

She hastily put down Dan's breakfast tray, hurried over to the chair in which he was seated and began to fumble with the knots that bound him to it. Finally, she removed the gag that had been stuffed into his mouth.

He swallowed twice. "Go easy with those knots, Bessie. The burglar tied them a mite tight."

When she had succeeded in freeing him, Bessie asked him if he were all right. Without waiting for

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his answer, she seized his wrist and began to take his pulse.

Dan Riley was seventy years old or, as Bessie in her professionally cheerful way kept phrasing it, "seventy years young." He still had a few wisps of white hair left which floated about the dome of his head, and his blue eyes were still bright and able to pierce the doctors and staff of the Crestview Haven nursing home like steel knives. He had a temper but it was the kind of temper that characterized old dogs lying in a pool of warm sunlight—much bark, little bite.

Dan had moved to the nursing home at the urging of his son and daughter-in-law with whom he had been living following the death of his wife, Laurie, a year ago. As he told himself at the time, "With Laurie gone, one place is just as good as another to me. I might as well let the youngsters sweep me under the rug and out of the way or else I'll get trampled to death underfoot for sure."

He watched Bessie counting the clock of his old blood and suppressed a grin. If he were twenty years younger, Bessie Croydon and he might . . . Well, he wasn't twenty years younger. So that was that.

"I'll get Doctor Jansen," Bessie said. "Now you just lie down on your bed and rest, Mr. Riley. You've had a really terrible shock."

Obligingly, Dan lay down on the bed as Bessie ran from the room. When she was gone, he thought about breakfast. He propped himself up on one elbow, looked at his tray, and made a face. Prunes, Pablum, milk—he decided he wasn't hungry. Maybe lunch would be better.

Doctor Jansen hurried into the room, followed by Bessie. He surveyed the debris. The bureau drawers were open and Dan's clothing was strewed about on the floor. The window was broken and almost completely empty of glass. It looked as if the burglar had carefully removed the larger pieces of glass and set them down on the floor to lean against the wall. The mirror above the bureau hung at an angle, the rug was rolled back.

"What happened, Mr. Riley?" Doctor Jansen asked excitedly.

"Burglary," Dan said, deliberately stating the obvious because he enjoyed sending young Doctor Jansen into what Laurie used to call "a tizzy."

"I can see that," Doctor Jansen said with barely hidden anger. "Did you see the burglar? Did he hurt you?"

"He wore a mask," Dan replied, "and carried a pistol. I didn't resist so he didn't hurt me. I didn't even have a chance to call for help. To

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tell you the truth, I was frightened."

"It looks like he broke in through the window," Bessie said.

Dan nodded as he stared at the window box in which she had stuck some artificial daffodils.

"Did he steal anything from you, Mr. Riley?" Doctor Jansen sat down beside the bed and began to take Dan's pulse.

Dan pulled his hand away. "He stole my watch. It was all I had worth taking." He rubbed the spot on his wrist where his watch had been and where his pulse still throbbed persistently.

"Well, I've called the police," Doctor Jansen said. "They're sending someone over to take your statement." He glanced at the broken window. "We may have to consider installing bars."

Dan grimaced. "To keep the burglars out or us old codgers in?"

"For the protection of our guests, obviously."

Dan muttered something that caused Bessie's face to flush and Doctor Jansen to pretend he hadn't heard it. "You protect us too much as it is," he said. "I can't smoke cigars. I can't send out for pizza."

"Too spicy," Doctor Jansen said automatically.

"Why, my cigars are mild as a zephyr."

"I meant the pizza."

"You won't allow whiskey in the rooms. I always used to have a short snort before I went to bed. That was before I lost my mind and came here. Laurie and I sometimes had a highball before dinner and on holidays we even had brandy afterward. Oh, you protect us all right. So go ahead, put bars on the windows. Why not charge admission for people to come and see us eat our prunes and Pablum. The greatest show on earth—feeding time at the old folks zoo!"

"Don't work yourself up so, Mr. Riley," Bessie said. "You know what it does to your liver."

"Damn my liver!" Dan roared. "Anyway, it's *my* liver!" He pounded his chest, which brought on a mild fit of coughing. When it had subsided, he said, "This whole machine is mine and I intend to run it the way I see fit until the day it won't run anymore. That's the day I'll hand it over to you. But not before. So take those prunes and that other awful stuff out of my sight!"

Doctor Jansen pursed his lips as if he had just bitten into a sour lemon drop. He stood up and stiffly left the room.

Bessie, at the door, was shaking her head from side to side in solicitous dismay for both her patient and her employer. "Mr. Riley, I wish you wouldn't upset him so."

"He upsets me so," Dan replied.

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"Bessie, come here, girl. I want to whisper something in your lovely little ear."

Bessie, smiling, came over to the bed and bent down. When she straightened a moment later, her face wore an expression of not very convincing shock. "Mr. Riley, I most certainly will not!"

"Ah, Bessie, be a sport. Just this once. It'll be just between us. It'll be our little secret."

She was obviously wavering, weakening. She glanced at her watch. "All right," she agreed finally. "But just this once. I'll drive over to Pete's Peppy Pizza Parlor and bring you back a slice on my lunch hour."

"A whole pie, Bessie. With mushrooms and lots of cheese."

"A slice. One."

"Bessie, you're a jewel and a joy." He kissed her cheek and she fled in delight from the room.

After she had gone, he got out of bed and proceeded to straighten up his room. When he was almost finished, there was a knock on the door and he opened it to find Detective Lieutenant Robert Holding standing in the hall.

Holding shook Dan's hand and said, "When I heard who the victim was, I decided to investigate this case myself. How've you been, Dan?"

"Terrible!" came the abrupt reply. "Everything is against me."

Holding's eyes narrowed. "The burglar rough you up?"

Dan shook his head and pointed to the door. "It's *them*."

"Them?"

"Doctor Jansen and his cohorts. They're all against me. All except Bessie Croydon."

"How's that, Dan?"

He repeated his sad story about the pizza and the whiskey, the prunes and the Pablum.

Holding smiled. "You've drunk more than your share of whiskey in your day, Dan. There comes a time—"

"Balderdash!"

They talked then. They reminisced about Dan Riley's long and distinguished career on the police force. They remembered things that both of them thought they had long ago forgotten. They discussed the capture of the three thugs who had been holding up gas stations in the area and Dan's key role in their apprehension. Event followed event in their discussion until they came up against the moment in time when Dan had taken compulsory retirement from the force. They fell silent then.

At last, Holding said, "Well, I'd better get on with the investigation or they'll be wanting to put me out to pasture too, and I've still got a few good years left." He looked

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around the room. "What happened last night, Dan? Tell me all you can and I promise you I'll get the guy who did this. I'll run him right into the ground."

"Oh, it's not all that important, Bob. He just picked the wrong place, I guess. Or maybe he thought I had a few million stashed away under my mattress. Anyway, all he got was my wristwatch."

"Can you describe it?"

Dan did and Holding made notes. He listened as Dan told him about the young burglar—what he wore, what he looked like above his black mask. Holding wrote it all down, then got up and strolled about the room. "It does seem funny when you think about it that a burglar would break into a nursing home."

Dan laughed. "It's a little like breaking into a prison. Do you know what that fool Jansen said? He said he was thinking about putting bars on the windows. You should have heard what I had to say about that!"

Holding bent over and examined the large pieces of broken glass leaning against the wall. "Looks like he was pretty clumsy. I'd say he was either inexperienced or careless. He could have cut the window just above the latch and reached in and opened it easily."

"Maybe he was losing his touch. It happens."

"But you told me he was a young man. Young men don't—"

"Did I? Yes, I guess I did. Well, don't pay too much attention to what I say, Bob. Hardly anybody else around here ever does." He paused. "Say, Bob, you wouldn't happen to have an extra cigar, would you?"

Holding hesitated.

"Oh, come on, Bob! Not you, too? What are you afraid of? A charge of murder one just because you gave me a cigar?"

Holding reached into his pocket and handed Dan his last two cigars. Dan promptly hid them under his pillow.

"I'll phone for a fingerprint man," Holding said. "We may be able to identify our boyo that way if he's got a record."

Dan waved his hand in the air, a gesture of mild impatience. "It was only a nine ninety-five wristwatch. Forget it."

"Whatever happened to the Scourge of Crime?" Holding asked. "You want me to let this guy get away with robbing my best friend?"

Dan smiled at Holding, started to speak but found he couldn't utter the words after all. It didn't matter. He saw that Holding sensed what he was feeling. Old

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friends were like that. They didn't have to be told truths they already knew.

Two days later, when Detective Holding returned to Crestview Haven he brought news for Dan. It was news that puzzled him, as he was quick to state.

"I just can't figure it," he told Dan as they sat at the window in which the glass had been replaced and which was open to admit the spring breeze. "It just doesn't tally with what we know about Mr. William Rumson's *modus operandi*." He dropped the mug shots of Rumson that he had brought onto the bed.

Dan frowned and said, "You didn't make a mistake? You're sure the prints you lifted from the glass really are Billy's?"

"No question about it. The others were either yours or were traceable to members of the staff. But like I said, it just doesn't figure. You know how Williams used to operate."

"Sure, I remember Billy the Kidder. He was one of the best confidence men in the business. Widows were his specialty. He could talk them into buying the Brooklyn Bridge or signing their life savings over to him."

"So why, I ask you, is a confidence man like Billy breaking into nursing homes? It just doesn't make sense," Holding protested.

"People change," Dan said, looking out to where a pretty girl was strolling slowly across the grounds looking like the incarnation of spring itself.

"Not that much. Billy must be in his sixties now. He just got out of state prison two months ago. And you, Dan, were the one who put him there. You know something? I think there's more to this case than meets the eye. I think Billy might have been trying to get even with you for sending him up. I think you just might be the luckiest man alive. He might have intended to kill you."

"Balderdash! Billy wouldn't do that. He's not the killing kind. Besides, he had his chance, if that's what he was after, and if that's really who it was."

Bessie Croydon came into the room carrying a tray. "Soup's on," she declared cheerfully and set the tray down.

Dan looked at the bowl of thin broth and grimaced. "I'm not hungry," he muttered.

Bessie wagged a stern finger at him and was about to leave the room when the mug shots on the bed attracted her attention. "Why, that's the man who—"

"Take that soup away, Bessie!" Dan bellowed, "before I get Detective Holding here to arrest you for

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attempted murder. That soup's enough to poison a man half my age."

Bob Holding held up his hand and Bessie halted. "Excuse me, Miss . . . ?"

"Croydon."

"Miss Croydon, were you going to say something about this—this gentleman in the pictures?" He held up the mug shots.

"I was just going to say that he looks a lot like the man Doctor Jansen put out of here a week ago. He's younger in the pictures, of course, but I'm pretty sure it's the same man." She glanced meaningfully at Dan. "*He* knows what I

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mean. Don't you, Mr. Riley?"

"This man," Holding said, tapping the photographs, "was here a week ago?"

"Yes. That was the second time he came to visit Mr. Riley. The first time was a week and a half ago. *That* time there was no trouble. But the second time he came he brought a bottle of bourbon with him. He must have hidden it under his coat. Anyway, Doctor Jansen surprised the two of them in here *imbibing* and he ordered the man off the premises at once."

Dan stood up quickly and said, "Excuse me, I have to go to the bathroom."

"Sit down, Dan," Holding said. "Thank you, Miss Croydon."

When Bessie had left the room, Holding turned to Dan and said, "Okay, Dan, out with it. The truth this time, all of it. Start at the beginning."

With a sigh, Dan sat down again. "It's like she said," he admitted. "Billy came here a week and a half ago. He came to—gloat. He said he'd heard where I was and he wanted to see how I was enjoying my dotage. He said he'd thought about me a lot, all during his years in prison. His hatred of me for nailing him, he said, was the thing that kept him alive all those years."

"So I was *right*! He *did* plan to kill you!"

"Balderdash! Billy's not the killing kind. I already told you that."

"Well, he's not the breaking-and-entering kind either. So what—"

"If you'll just keep quiet for more than a minute at a time I'll tell you so what." Dan reached out and touched one of the artificial daffodils in the window box. For a time he was silent. Then he said, "When Billy saw how it was here for me, well, he had himself one good big laugh, I can tell you. He said I was in almost as bad a prison as he had been and it served me right. He asked me what crime I'd committed to warrant such a sentence."

Holding, with difficulty, kept silent.

"I told him I had grown old," Dan said in a low voice.

Holding noted the faraway look in his friend's eyes as Dan fingered a flower that wasn't real and watched the pretty girl outside who would never walk his way.

"I guess," Dan continued, "he began to feel sort of sorry for me. After he had stopped laughing himself silly, I mean. You know, he's no teen-ager himself anymore. We talked some about the old days and about how we had gotten mixed up with one another in the past that time and how it finally

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worked out for both of us. That was the first time he came, but I got him to promise to come back. He's retired from what he called 'the business' but he hasn't gone so straight that he wasn't willing to be an accessory."

"An accessory?"

"I gave him some money, and the second time he came he brought me that bottle of bourbon Bessie had the bad grace to mention. Bob, that bourbon was *one hundred proof!* It tasted to me like—it's hard to explain—but it tasted like the year Laurie and I got married. It tasted like the day I got my first citation for bravery. It tasted like *life*, Bob. I don't know if you can understand that, but—"

"I can understand it, Dan."

"Well, Billy and me and the bourbon were getting along just fine until Doctor Jansen showed up. That man can smell sin a mile away, I tell you. He threw poor Billy out. I felt terrible. But then, the other night, there was a tapping on my window. I woke up and got out of bed and there was Billy outside the window, grinning in at me. He had climbed up the trellis."

"So there wasn't a burglar, after all."

"No, there was just Billy, and he hadn't come to take anything away. He'd come to bring something *in*. He told me later that climbing the trellis in the middle of the night was the only way he figured he could get back into this place, since Jansen had thrown him out, and since he was bringing me another bottle of bourbon and a box of cigars. Now you know that Billy was the very best at any kind of con but he turned out to be a lousy second-story man. He broke the window trying to get it open, or rather, we did. I was helping him from my side. It was stuck. We made a mess out of it, as you saw."

"You sure did. He should have worn gloves."

"He didn't expect to break the window. He didn't think anyone except me would ever know he'd been here again. Well, with the window broken and all, we had to make it look good or Jansen would blame me and maybe have me certified incompetent or something—dangerous, maybe. Billy thought up the burglary idea. It sounded fine to me at the time, so he tied me up, upset the room a bit and took my watch for good measure. You know the rest."

"I know the rest."

"What are you going to do?"

"What are *you* going to do, Dan? If you don't press charges . . ." Holding waited.

Dan grinned and shook his head.

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"Billy's coming back today to return my watch. He's going to insist that they search him so they'll know he's clean and let him in. And *I'm* going to insist that they let him in. After all, I've still got my rights!"

Billy the Kidder arrived promptly at two o'clock, which was the time visiting hours at Crestview Haven began. Dan and Holding participated in the brief but heated verbal melee with Doctor Jansen in the reception room, with the happy result that Billy was granted visiting privileges.

Dan told Bessie Croydon that he was not to be disturbed for the next few hours. Did she understand? Bessie, with a conspiratorial wink, said that she understood. She would see to it that they were not disturbed. She would see to the good Doctor Jansen.

She left, closing the door behind her, and the three men sat down by the open window. Dan removed the daffodils and the fake mat of grass that supported them and took out the bottle of bourbon he had hidden beneath them, along with the box of cigars.

"This is the bottle Billy brought me the other night," he told Holding as he held it up to catch the light. "The night he visited me, uh, after hours."

"The night of the great wristwatch robbery," Holding said with a broad smile.

"That's right," Dan said as he poured drinks for his guests and lighted one of the cigars Holding had given him on his previous visit.

Billy, in the slick, smooth voice that had gained him entrance to the hearts and minds of scores of widows during his career, said, "I am of the definite opinion that a man like Daniel Riley here deserves a chance to do good time in this most bleak of prisons; every possible chance. Don't you agree, Detective Holding?"

Holding nodded his head vigorously and raised his glass. "I agree, one hundred percent. If anybody deserves a chance to do good time, it's Dan Riley."

They drank to that.

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A special agent called Luck is often credited too generously.

With a Little Bit of Luck

I WAS IN my Montgomery Street office on a cool summer afternoon, working out a portfolio of investments for a middle-aged couple who had inherited a good deal more money than they had ever imagined they would, when Cissy Regent's call was given me by my secretary. She said, "Hi, David. Am I bothering you?" That was Hood Society code for announcing a new

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case turned up by our investigative members.

"You never bother me, Cissy," I said, smiling at my newly acquired clients and leaning back in the expensive leather chair.

"Maybe that's the trouble. I don't bother you. I wish I did."

Her smooth, liquid voice shaped the words perfectly, and her tone was seductive, but it was only part of the act. I could visualize her in her studio on Post Street as she mimed her role: head tipped back, golden hair flowing over her shoulders, mouth turned in a knowing smile, cigarette holder held between long, slender fingers, wearing one of her own creations—probably a chic pants outfit—all the while staring upward with her lovely green eyes, which always seemed to look bemused.

"How about another chance at it this evening?" she asked. "Bothering you, I mean? Nicely, I hope?"

She'd probably already given the same routine to Andy Kinder, in his law office on Market Street.

by Benjamin Swift

The three of us always worked together. "That sounds very inviting."

"Sevenish?"

"I'll count the hours."

"Liar," she said, laughing. "But I love you. Good-bye, darling."

I was able to leave my office by five-fifteen that afternoon. I went out past my secretary—a gentle gray-haired woman in her fifties who steadily destroyed younger secretaries with her experience-honed skills. Then I was in the main office of Bart & Company, where my young brokers were finishing their work in individual booths. They were honestly earning their salaries working in the bewildering bear market we were experiencing. People were often surprised to find that the head of Bart & Company was just a bit over thirty, but I'd worked hard and been lucky enough to have accomplished it. It was one of the strong reasons I'd felt an obligation to the Hood Society. Not everybody was imbued with enough luck, talent or skill to make it without help, and that was where we came in.

I drove home to my apartment high on Russian Hill, left my car with the doorman, chatted amiably with the elevator man, then found myself in a huge livingroom with the massive dark-wooded furniture I had always preferred. One side of

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the room was created out of a window which overlooked a magnificent San Francisco panorama created from Aquatic Park, Fort Mason, Yacht Harbor, Golden Gate Bridge, the water of the San Francisco Bay and, in the distance, that ex-prison island of Alcatraz.

Freddie met me with his exuberant smile lighting his round Filipino features. He took my hat, and I remembered the young intellectual who had somehow gotten included in one of my small dinner parties a few evenings before. He'd sported a handlebar mustache and shoulder-length hair. After too much of my Scotch, he'd begun berating me for living the life of an indolent, decadent, self-satisfied capitalist who had the nerve, in this day and age, to employ a poor, abused Filipino houseboy as a lowly and downtrodden servant.

I listened, knowing that the kid had never done an hour's work in his life; he'd emanated from one of the city's wealthiest families. He preached involvement and compassion for the unfortunate, but I knew he would never get involved beyond a drunken sermon at a dinner table. I also knew that his compassion was all brain, no heart, as well as the fact that Freddie would handle the thing himself.

He did, coming out of the kitchen to stare at the kid with dark angry eyes. "What are you talking about?" he said. "Nobody ever called me a houseboy before. I just run this house for Mr. Bart, and I do it my own way. I try to put some class in it. What I expect in return is a little class from the guests we invite. You don't have it. Why don't you split? Now!"

I stared at the youth as he turned a deep reddish hue, eyes showing shock. He left in a hurry. I knew that no "servant" had ever treated him in that fashion before.

"We're having a soufflé, Mr. Bart," Freddie was saying now. Calling me by my last name was the single formality he insisted upon retaining. "Broiled lobster tails and Freddie's salad. I chilled a bottle of that rosé you called for a couple of weeks ago . . ." He stopped, staring at me suspiciously, already realizing that I'd committed Cardinal Sin Number One—I hadn't told him I wouldn't be staying for dinner.

"I apologize, Freddie. Cissy Regent invited me, and—"

"You couldn't pick up the phone, huh?"

"Well, I was busy all day. Now, damn it—"

But he was grinning. "Hood business, huh?"

I nodded. "A new one."

"In that case, I'll freeze all but the wine."

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I shook my head. "Ask someone over. How about that girl—the one with the walk?"

Freddie's grin widened. "Man, you are not getting half an argument over that."

He got on the phone as I showered, shaved and dressed again. Then I drove over to Cissy's combination apartment-studio.

The interior, as always, smelled faintly of the oils she uses when she is pursuing her impressive hobby of painting. Cissy overcame that by kissing me fondly on the cheek so that I could enjoy that rare subtle perfume which characterizes her presence. She might be one of the city's best-known designers, but she is also one of its most beautiful women, period. She led me through her livingroom with its wildly colored oils and fashion sketches on the walls, the overall furnishing lavish and feminine, then into the small dining room with its tasteful round table where Andy Kinder was already seated, sipping a martini.

He grinned and stood up to shake hands. He is even taller than I, but he has somehow never achieved much sartorial accomplishment. His suits always look as though he'd bought them off the rack in the basement of a discount department store. With his rangy build and his wide, rugged-looking face topped by an untamed thatch of gray-brown hair, he looks as though he might be more comfortable in the attire of a lumberjack. Still, he is a crack corporate lawyer and an essential member of our Society.

I mixed a martini for myself, a pink lady for Cissy. Then we sat at the table and Cissy, who has an amazingly accurate memory, gave us the investigators' report verbally, starting by saying: "Her name is Marian Adams, and she lives in Pine Junction."

"Let's see," Andy said in his bass voice, "that's on the other side of the state, isn't it?"

Cissy nodded. "At the foot of the Sierra, off Highway Fifty. Medium-sized town, where her husband was a partner in a trucking firm. Not a really big operation, but profitable. Her husband's name was Ephram Adams, a solid kind of citizen, belonged to all the civic clubs, went to church regularly and all of that. Loved his wife, was true to her. No kids, but they were very close. His partner's name is Nicolas Holter. Business, it appears, makes as strange bedfellows as politics. Nick Holter might have made a good infantry general. That's how he's run his own family, anyway. A wife who's never let out of the kitchen, five kids who left home just as soon as they could."

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I nodded. "So what did Holter do?"

"Conned Ephram Adams' widow, Marian, out of their life's savings."

"How much?" Andy asked.

"Fifty-four thousand dollars," Cissy said.

Andy's features looked pained. He was a very straightforward kind of man who could think with that utter reasonability that lawyers achieve, but he tended to group things simply into black or white. Conning a widow out of fifty-four thousand dollars honestly offended his entire nature. That was why he was such a good man for the Society.

"How?" I asked.

"A log slipped out of a truck bed," Cissy said, "and the accident left Ephram Adams paralyzed, unable to communicate in any way, with not much time to live. Shortly after that, Mr. Nick Holter got Adams' wife alone and said he'd discovered that her husband had fixed the company's books over a long period of years and that he was guilty of embezzling a great deal of money from the firm. He apparently had been able to make a fairly accurate guess as to how much Ephram Adams had been able to save over the years—and I mean save legitimately. Because Holter told Mrs. Adams that her husband had swindled the company out of exactly fifty-four thousand dollars. They had in their savings a total of sixty thousand."

"In what form?" I asked.

"Mutual fund. Bonds. Bank account."

"And she bought this nonsense?" Andy asked with his usual incredulity.

"She and her husband were close, all right, but she didn't know a thing about the business. And, remember, she couldn't take it up with him in his condition. So, yes. Someone who'd always relied completely on her husband, frightened, in grief and shock—she bought it."

Andy nodded, sighing. "And so Nick Holter told her that if she would give him the fifty-four thousand, he would take over the business, destroy the evidence of her husband's embezzlement, and allow the poor devil to die in grace and honor, to be remembered forever as the paragon of Pine Junction's finest."

Cissy nodded. "That's it."

"She cashed in the bonds and the mutual fund, I presume?" I said.

"Yes. Paid Holter, and was left with about four thousand, which wasn't enough to cover the medical expenses involved in keeping her husband alive for the next months. He had just enough life insurance to bury him. So now he is dead,

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and she is a couple of thousand dollars in debt, with no income except Social Security. As a result, she's preparing to sell what she does have left, including her house and furniture."

"And all of this thanks to the gentleman we know as Nicolas Holter."

"Well, we don't *know* him yet," I said.

Andy finished his martini. "But we will."

"Oh, yes," Cissy said. "Indeed, we will." She was smiling softly, looking gentle, almost child-like at that moment, but I knew that she detested Nick Holter's sort as much as Andy and I did. Despite her outward appearance, she owned that special female talent of assuming an absolute hating coldness when it was necessary. There was no doubt of it: Holter was in trouble.

Cissy served dinner then, and we talked about the situation ahead, circling around it to get the right feeling.

Finally, over brandy, I studied Andy's face and recognized that his precise thinking had led him to a definite attitude. Cissy sensed it, too, and said, "What do you think, Andy?"

He tamped tobacco into his pipe, lit it, leaned back, and said, "The man's a crook."

"All right," I said, smiling. "We're not going to argue that. We know what he did to Mrs. Adams."

Andy nodded. "So follow a logical path of conjecture. If he did that to her, what has he done to a lot of others?"

"Mmmm," Cissy said softly. "So he simply has not been apprehended. I mean, before our good investigators ran onto him."

"How did they, by the way?" I interrupted.

"In a town like that, people simply knew that Mrs. Adams should have had a healthy savings to draw on. When she didn't pay the final medical bills, it was given to a collection agent. She finally broke down and told him what had happened to most of the money, imploring him not to let the town know. It got back to us through the agent."

I nodded. "Okay. And you were saying, Andy?"

"Just that our Mr. Holter, if guilty of other indiscretions, might very well be vulnerable."

"But to whom?" I said. "And how do we find out what he's guilty of besides what we know now?"

"Maybe we don't. Not precisely. But suppose he *has* taken in a goodly amount of other profits of this nature—do you suppose he

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would have reported any of it as income to the Internal Revenue Service?"

I tasted my brandy. "A party to whom he would be most vulnerable."

"I love you, Andy," Cissy said, her eyes sparkling.

Andy looked pleased. "Have I found some sort of Achilles' heel on the gentleman?" he asked.

"Most definitely," I answered.

"But just what method we use to wound that heel—"

"I just figured it out," I said.

So I told them how I thought we should do it. When I'd finished, Andy stared at me with that kind of faint shock he always shows when I come up with something like this. I think, despite our association in the Society, that Andy considers a stockbroker to be in a sort of stereotyped mold of the conservative individual I am not. It takes some imagination, guts and a touch of madness to deal with the stock market successfully. But I knew that he would come around to the idea well enough.

"Risky as hell," he said slowly. "If we're caught at it, there goes a good law firm, a good brokerage house and the career of a very fine fashion designer. But . . ."

"But what?" I asked, grinning.

"Let's do it," Andy said.

"Let's," Cissy said, laughing softly. She leaned over and kissed my cheek. "It's beautiful, darling. And remember, I love you, too."

We were ready in two days, which was how long it took for our expert to complete the identification we would need. I didn't require any changes of appearance, although I decided to choose one of my least expensive-looking suits. Andy would pass easily. Cissy, because of her profession, was often seen pictured in the papers or being interviewed on television, and so she frequently assumed various manners of disguise. But this time there was no need for that. Her only function in the plan would be to answer a single telephone call—*if* we got lucky. The overall advantage each of us had was in being able to take time off from work easily to serve our roles with the Society, and we paid our own way because we could afford it.

I was up early on the chosen day. Freddie served me an excellent breakfast, listening with his bright smile as I outlined our plans for the day. Then he nodded. "I figure you got it in your pocket."

"I hope so, anyway. What are you going to do while I'm gone?"

"I've been thinking about it."

"'It' meaning that girl?"

"Well . . . that's just about right."

I walked down the hill to Powell

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carrying an attaché case and got on a cable car which climbed up Nob Hill and then rolled down toward Market. I sat outside and enjoyed the fresh chilled air from off the water beyond. Downtown, I walked into a car-rental agency and signed for a new sedan, using a phony name. I was feeling a familiar edge of excitement.

I picked up Cissy first. She looked radiant. Then I drove over Twin Peaks to St. Francis Wood where we collected Andy from his large house. He'd lost his wife several years ago, but he was able to provide his four children with the proper care since. They were too young to understand his involvement in the Hood Society, so on these occasions he was, for their information, simply going to a court appointment somewhere in the state. He kissed two of the youngest at the door, then came down to the car carrying his large battered briefcase, looking for all the world like a typical government employee.

I drove back over the hill and downtown to pick up a ramp leading onto the Bay Bridge. Minutes later, we were speeding east on Highway 80, leaving the cool of San Francisco, moving into the bake-oven heat of the Sacramento Valley. In less than two hours, we stopped at the small house in Sacramento which the Society had provided. We lunched there. Then Andy and I started traveling again, leaving Cissy behind.

A little after three o'clock, we rolled into Pine Junction. It was an old town with narrow streets and neat frame houses. I'd studied a map of the place, so I knew where to find Marian Adams' house, a comfortable-looking old structure which had gained a dignified beauty through careful use over the years. I drove slowly by as we looked at the tall oaks shading the front yard with its neatly trimmed grass and hedges and flowers, and a stone walk Ephram Adams had undoubtedly created with his own hands.

Then I saw Mrs. Adams kneeling in her garden in the rear. Her white hair was tucked neatly under a floppy straw hat, her hands encased in leather gloves as she dug at the soil with a small spade. She appeared composed and in total control of herself. But just before she went out of sight, I saw the sun glint off a tear moving slowly down a cheek.

"Let's find a motel," Andy said gruffly, "so we can get this done."

We picked one at random and checked into a large two-bed unit. I said, "The bank *should* be closed now."

Andy lifted the telephone. "Bet-

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ter check." It was closed. "Let's hit him," Andy said.

I drove directly to Nicolas Holter's truck operation on the edge of town. We parked beside a large log-carrying rig, then moved swiftly toward the office, carrying our cases, looking grim. We stepped into a small room where a young girl with large glasses sat typing.

She looked up, immediately appearing apprehensive. "Mr. Holter," I said threateningly.

"But . . . did you have an appointment?"

I pulled out my wallet and flipped it open to show her the identification our artist had created.

She blinked. "FBI?" she managed.

"IRS," I said. "Is he in there?" I nodded toward a closed door.

"Yes, but—"

Andy opened the door and we marched into Holter's cluttered office. Holter, a bulldog of a man with a gray crew cut and a wide jaw and the hardest eyes I'd ever seen, looked up in surprise, then in anger. "What's going on?" he demanded.

I showed the ID, saying, "Special Agent Oliver, from the Investigation Division of Internal Revenue, out of Sacramento. This is Agent Smith. We're here to check your books from nineteen sixty-seven through sixty-nine."

"What the hell!" he said in a tough, rasping voice. He stood up, short, but massive of shoulders, wearing an open-necked sports shirt and trousers which dated themselves by their pleats.

"That's our assignment," Andy said, getting his voice just as tough.

"Now, wait a minute," Holter said. "Sixty-seven? That's beyond the statute of limitations! You can't—"

"There is no statute of limitations where there's fraud," Andy snapped.

"Fraud!" He blinked once, then some of the fire went out of his eyes; it was replaced by the first hints of fear. I decided that Andy had put us in the right direction, but we still had to carry it off. "I'm not guilty of fraud!" he said loudly.

"You've got nothing to worry about, then," I said. "We simply want to see your record of income through that period." I was looking about the room for a safe, and I was relieved when I failed to find one.

"If somebody's accusing me of fraud, I'm calling my lawyer!"

"Do that," Andy said condemningly.

"It's your privilege, Mr. Holter," I said, smiling at him, knowing

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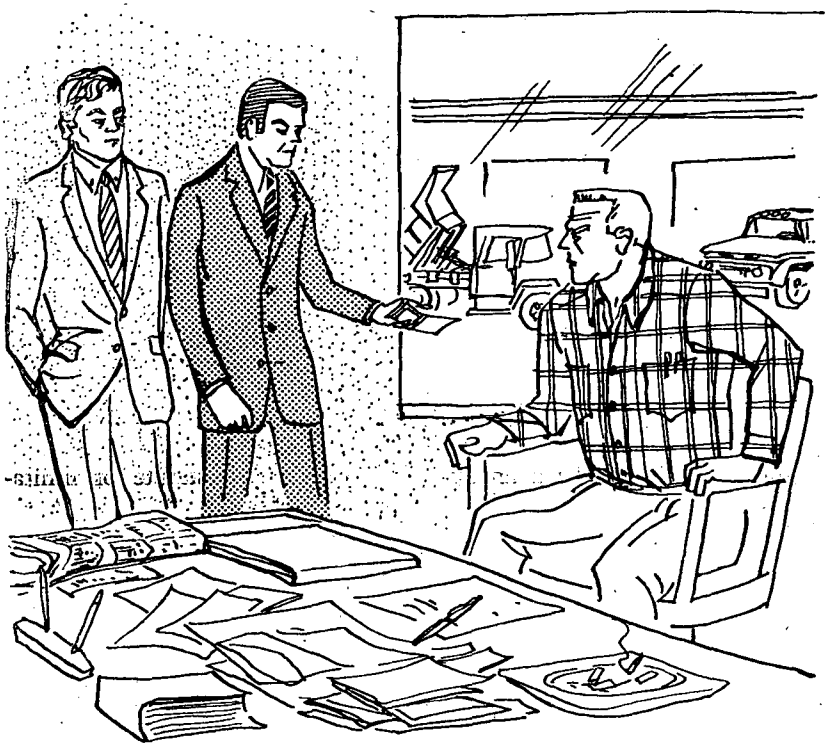

that if he didn't pick up that telephone on his desk we were still alive with it.

He did start to reach for it, but Andy said, "When a man phones his lawyer two minutes after we arrive, we figure he's guilty. Ten times out of ten. If the lead's a bum one, why does a man need a lawyer? Why waste the fee? It doesn't figure. That's when we really bear down."

"But the man has a perfect right to consult his attorney no matter how we view it," I said to Andy, playing the good guy. "Go ahead, sir."

Holter's hairy hand touched the telephone. "I'm not guilty of any damn fraud, I tell you!"

I nodded. "Then we'll just take a look at your books, ask a few simple questions, and that's all there'll be to it."

He hesitated, then said, "All right, then!"

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He angrily removed journals from a bookcase and slammed them down on his desk. I smiled politely and said, "Thank you, sir."

I sat down with the journals as Andy stood staring at Holter with an accusing expression. Holter paced nervously around the room, edging glances at me as I faked checking entry after entry. These were the books that Holter had convinced Mrs. Adams had been fixed by her husband. I knew there wouldn't be a hint of anything wrong in them, but I didn't care. It was only part of the show we were putting on. I gave it proper time, making notes that meant nothing at all in a book produced from the attaché case. Finally, I said, "All right. Now your assets, please."

"You mean what the business is worth?" he asked.

"Cash," I said. "Checking account? Personal? Commercial?"

"Naturally!"

"What bank?" I knew, but he didn't know I did, of course.

He told me.

"That's all?"

"That's it!"

I wrote some more nonsense, then I said very casually, "Safe-deposit box?"

There was a silent pause, then: "Certainly."

"What's in it?"

I looked at him. His face had become a shade darker. He motioned a hand. "What's in a safe-deposit box, anyway? The usual."

"Such as, Mr. Holter?"

"Well . . ." He shook his head in exasperation. "Some negotiables. Insurance policies. Like that."

"Cash?" I asked.

Holter stared at me, blinking again.

"He said do you have any cash in there?" Andy asked brusquely.

"No!"

I made another small notation in my book, put it in my case, then stood up. "Very good. That's all, then, I think. We appreciate your cooperation."

His eyes looked fiery again. "Bum steer, huh? What happened? Somebody hates my guts tried to put the knife in me, huh? I hear they get ten percent if the tip works out."

I nodded. "But we can't reveal anything specific of that nature. I hope you understand."

"Yeah, yeah," he said.

We walked toward the door, then stopped. "I did neglect, by the way, to say we'll want to go through that safe-deposit box. Too late today, of course. Tomorrow?"

Holter's expression suddenly turned to one of near panic. "Some bum tries to make ten percent on a phony tip, and you guys still got to—?"

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"What time does the bank open?" I asked.

"Ten," he said, voice fogging.

"We'll meet you there at eleven."

"You got to do that?"

"That's right," I said, smiling. "Thank you very much, Mr. Holter."

I'd been waiting for what I figured was a strong suspicious streak in him to catch up. It did then. He said, "I told you I got some negotiables in that box. How do I know you're really IRS? Because—like I take you in tomorrow morning and we get in that room they got and you put a gun on me and walk out with those negotiables in your briefcase. Maybe a nice, sweet con, all this, huh?"

"You saw the identification," Andy said.

"Maybe phony. Or stolen. How do I know?"

I removed my wallet again and slipped out a neatly printed card. "This has the phone number of the home office in Sacramento. If you'd care to check, please do. Eleven tomorrow, Mr. Holter?"

We left as he stood reading that card which had been made up by our specialty man.

Driving back to the motel, Andy said, "You think he'll check us?"

"Yes."

"Using that number on the card you gave him? Or is he going to pick up the phone and ask Information, who'll give him the right one?"

"With a little bit of luck . . ."

"We'll need it."

As soon as we got back to the motel I telephoned the same Sacramento number which had been printed on that card I'd given to Holter. When Cissy answered, she said, "He must have picked up his phone right after you left. I told him he had the IRS office, Investigation Division. He asked if he was being checked and, if so, what were the names of the agents. I told him. I think he went for it."

"Good," I said with some relief.

"Is it going all right?" she asked anxiously.

"So far, Cissy. So far."

At five minutes before ten o'clock the next morning, Andy and I were sitting in our rented sedan, parked in front of the bank. Andy lit his pipe and said, "He could still go for his lawyer."

"He could."

Andy puffed. "Or finally realize that we could have given him a phony number on that card, then get the right one."

"True." I nodded, stretching a leg. "What are the penalties for impersonating a special agent of the IRS, by the way?"

"You really want to know?"

"No," I said.

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Then I saw him hurrying along the side of the bank from the back where he'd parked his car. A clerk inside the bank was unlocking the front door as Holter rounded the corner, then saw us. He gave the illusion of skidding to a stop on his heels, blinking, reddening. He started to turn around. I actually thought he might start running. But he got control of himself and walked over to us, saying, "You said ten o'clock, right?"

"Eleven," I replied, getting out.

"But it's nice just to sit out here," Andy said, also climbing out, "and see who goes into the bank the second it opens." He nodded. "Since you're here an hour early, you want to go in now, Mr. Holter?"

Holter couldn't seem to find his voice for a moment. I could imagine the way his mind was working now. Give it up and turn it over to the lawyer, hoping for the best that way? Or take the *second* possibility that Andy and I had discussed? He looked at me, then at Andy, as though making final judgment, then said, "Let's get the damn thing over."

We went in and the tellers looked at us curiously. Holter signed a card and gave a girl his key to match the bank's. We followed her into a vault and watched her unlock the box, then slide it out. She gave it to Holter and led us into a small anteroom with a plain oak table and some straight chairs. The girl left, closing the door behind her.

I saw that a small tic had begun in Holter's right eye. Andy stood. I sat down and opened the metal box. I removed papers until I saw the currency. I took it out and removed the rubber bands and spread the green on the table. There was a little more than a hundred thousand dollars.

I leaned back, looking at Holter, whose face was now an ashen color. I said, "He should have called his lawyer."

Andy shook his head pityingly "In excess of a hundred grand . . . stowed away very nicely in that box . . . unreported. I don't care how you got it, Holter. I only care that it's fraud. You're in big trouble, do you know that?"

Holter swallowed with difficulty. He brushed a trembling hand across his chest.

"You didn't really think we'd be stupid enough to let you run in here ahead of us and get it out and put it someplace else and *then* meet us here at eleven, did you?" Andy asked. "We're professionals, Holter."

"Maybe," he managed. "But I mean . . . how much do they pay government professionals, anyhow?"

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I stared at him. Andy did. Holter had opted for that second possibility, all right.

"Lots of security, huh?" he said. "But no big money. Ain't that right?" His eyes looked wild. He seemed ready to panic entirely. "You get what I mean?" He touched the money with that trembling hand. "We make a deal, huh?"

"Deal," I said.

"Deal," Andy repeated.

"You take a little. Then we forget the whole thing." The tic was working harder now.

We continued to stare at him, silently.

"Okay, boys?" Holter said, having trouble controlling his voice now.

"Are you trying to bribe us, Mr. Holter?" I asked.

"Bribe!" he said, motioning. "What's in a word? I put a little something in your pocket, and you forget all this. How many chances you got like this, anyway? What are you? Boy Scouts? Nah! You want a little something, huh?"

"He means it," Andy said to me.

I nodded. "I think he does."

"Go ahead," Holter said. "Take a piece of the pie."

"How big?" Andy asked gently.

"Make it good on yourselves. A thousand each."

Andy has a nice basso laugh, and it started now; a slow rumbling of mirth which rolled out as he sat down wagging his head. "A thousand each."

"What's the matter with you?" Holter said. "You want fifteen hundred? Is that it?"

"Make it fifty thousand," Andy said. "For the two of us."

Holter started coming apart again. "Are you *crazy*?"

"Don't shout, Holter," Andy said.

"You're not taking no fifty grand!" Holter sputtered.

"Fifty-one then?" I said.

"No!"

"Fifty-two," Andy said.

"You're nuts!"

"It keeps going up, Holter," I told him. "It's fifty-three now."

His entire body was trembling. *"No!"*

"Final offer," Andy said. "Fifty-four."

"I'm taking it to my lawyer. I'll take the penalties! No fifty-four grand to you bums!"

"All right," Andy said. "Then we'll absolutely ruin you, Holter. A hundred thousand dollars not reported to the United States Government? What do you think that'll do to that trucking business of yours when it gets out? Who's going to trust Nick Holter for a nickle's worth of business once we get done hitting you with that? I

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don't know how you've got any reputation at all, the way you must have handled it to pile it up this way. But you won't have either one anymore, when we get done with you. You want the lawyer, you've got him."

Holter stared at us, eyes bright with tears. We waited. Finally he whispered, "Bums."

I started counting money. When I'd collected fifty-four thousand, I handed it to Andy, who put it in his large briefcase.

"Bums!" Holter whispered again, tears running down his cheeks.

"Put the rest in a better place," I said, standing.

He wagged his head, openly crying now. "Bums, bums, bums!"

We walked out of the bank.

As I drove toward Sacramento, Andy said, "Do you think he might change his mind and throw it to his lawyer?"

"I don't think so," I said. "Because I don't think that was all of it. If the IRS *did* go to work on him, they'd find the most lively one they've had in years."

"I guess we did have a little bit of luck."

I nodded. "That's what it takes sometimes."

We picked Cissy up in Sacramento, and I took time to phone Freddie to tell him we'd won that ball game.

"Beautiful!" he said. "Dinner for the victors, huh? With all of the trimmings?"

"With all of the trimmings."

When we approached the Bay Bridge again, I said, "We saw her working in her garden, Cissy. She looked like a very nice woman."

"Nice women should have what they deserve," Cissy nodded.

"Well, we can't return her husband to her," I said. "But—"

"This, anyway," Andy said, tapping his briefcase. "And she'll find out her husband wasn't a crook. That's something."

"Yes," Cissy said. "That's quite a lot. And look at the fog rolling in. It's always so beautiful. It smells and feels so lovely, after all of that heat. Isn't it pretty, David?"

"Yes," I said, driving into it. "It's very, very pretty."

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Where it is difficult to know individual men, it is helpful to know men in general.

I HAD A FEELING it was bad, although logically Wills was just delayed in getting back to the ship. Yet with the possibility that a hundred thousand dollars was involved, I put a lot of emphasis on my report to the captain that "everyone is present and accounted for, except Ensign Wills."

The captain lowered the messages he was reading and looked at me over the top of his glasses. "Anybody know anything about him?"

"I don't have the full story yet, but he came back to the ship around five yesterday afternoon, then went back on the beach last night about ten-thirty. The watch says he was carrying a suitcase when he left. I can't find anyone who has seen him since."

The captain continued reading as I talked. If you were not familiar with his habits you might wonder if he were actually listening. However, you only made that mistake once, and I had been his executive officer for the past six months. So I waited patiently for at least a full minute before he asked, "And you are certain no one else is missing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which does not make the situation one damn bit better. So, until

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I find out what is going on, no one is to go ashore without my express permission. Is that understood, Commander?"

"Yes, sir," I said flatly.

The captain looked up at me sharply, then shook his head. He put down the messages he was reading, took off his glasses, leaned back in his chair and rubbed the bald spot spreading back from his right temple. "Didn't need to say that, did I, Jim? You've already stopped liberty, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I knew you had. You usually stay two or three steps ahead of me." He smiled. "I guess a missing disbursing officer in a foreign port just naturally makes a captain jumpy."

"I can understand that. But Wills—I don't know—he doesn't seem the type. I think he'll turn up in an hour or two with a wild story and a red face."

"You have a high probability of being right, Jim, but this is unusual, so let's cover all the holes we can, just in case. Have the supply officer and the legal officer come up and see me."

"I'll send them right up." I started to leave.

"Wait a minute," he stopped me. "I have a few more things I want done and I need you back here in thirty minutes, so you have to move fast." I nodded and he continued. "First, have the officers standing by to talk with us; also, the watch from last night. Then, set up a three-officer inventory board with you as the senior member. Put the supply officer and the admin officer on it. If I decide to cut the safe, you can check it right away. And start the reports we would have to send."

I took notes the whole time he was talking. When he was obviously finished, I asked, "Do you think he's gone?"

"Jim, I gave up making judgments without all the facts a long time ago. I have enough worries without doing that. But, I also know it's best to cover all the bets I can and worry about a red face later. There is—or was—a lot of money in his safe. Tomorrow is pay day."

The captain turned back to his papers as I left his cabin and went below to my own. As I was entering, I saw the communications officer standing in the wardroom and I motioned for him to follow me. As he came through my door, he said, "Big excitement."

"Big enough, Sam. How about you dragging out those mysterious books you own and start preparing the message reports we have to send if it turns out to be more than just excitement."

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"I take it the captain thinks our Mr. Wills has blown town with all the money."

"You take nothing, Sam. I don't know what the captain thinks, and don't you start spreading rumors," I said sharply.

"Never entered my mind to spread a rumor, Commander. Hell, they're so thick out on deck now, I don't believe I could even get one in."

"Well, then, try to slow them down," I told him, knowing it was a hopeless task.

Sam knew it also, but kept a straight face and said, "Maybe I should go do something I can, like writing messages, huh?"

"That is an outstanding idea. So go, and let me do some work."

"Anything for my leader." Sam smiled. We had worked together for over a year and he knew my moods well. He started to leave, then stopped. "Jim, this may sound like a stupid question, but why doesn't the captain just open the safe and find out if the money is there or not?"

I shook my head at him and replied, "How do you propose that he open the safe? Wills has the only combination."

"He sure has combinations to all my safes. Did he slip up and miss getting them on supply?"

"No. By regulations, Sam, only one man has the combination to the disbursing safe: the disbursing officer."

"How about that," Sam replied interestedly. "Well, it's a poor day when you don't learn something new. I suppose it's a good idea—unless the disbursing officer disappears. Then it's a lousy one."

"Sam, get out of here."

"I'm already gone," he said, closing the door behind him.

I started issuing orders to complete the jobs the captain had given me, and when I finished, I paused long enough to look out of the porthole of my cabin at the warm Japanese countryside across Sasebo Harbor. We had steamed through the narrow channel opening into the anchorage yesterday morning. Japan was soft and green this time of year, and it had been hot down on the line. I had not been able to get ashore yesterday and had looked forward to doing so today. Now, unless Wills turned up soon, I would probably spend the next five days of our scheduled rest and upkeep buried in investigations and reports. It was a bleak prospect.

Still, I could not see Ensign Wills involved in theft—or maybe I didn't want to. I could not help but believe that very shortly we would find that our friendly bachelor had overslept in a soft bed

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overlooking a tiny Japanese garden. That was the only explanation that made much sense. A young man like Wills had the whole world just starting to open up for him. Jumping ship with a hundred thousand dollars of Uncle Sam's money would be stupid. Too many people would look too long in too many places to make it profitable unless he was heading for some part of the world that the long arms of the government couldn't reach. That thought pushed me out of my reverie and towards the captain's cabin.

At exactly eight-thirty the captain began to question the long line of people gathered outside his door. The legal officer and I sat as witnesses. As each one came into his cabin, the captain read them Article 15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and explained their right to refuse to answer any questions. However, no one seemed hesitant to talk and the interviews went rapidly.

I could detect no pattern to the captain's questions, nor find anything startling or illuminating in the replies. Most of the officers felt that Mr. Wills was fouled up on the beach and would return soon. A few character traits of Mr. Wills that were unfamiliar to me did appear, but they were nothing that would settle the matter conclusively. Primarily, they were guarded comments on his political beliefs and spending habits. However, they were only opinions and quite vague.

Factually, we found that Ensign Wills had been in the club with the other ship's officers the afternoon before; he had drunk two beers; was happy; showed no signs of unusual pressures; and had received a telephone call about four o'clock. This event in a new port was so strange that the officers with him asked about it when he returned to the table. He explained it as a mistake. The caller, he told them, had confused him with another Ensign Wills stationed on a destroyer. He had left the officers' club shortly after taking the call; returned to the ship in a liberty boat about five; and eaten dinner with the duty officers. He had told them he had a lot of paper work to catch up on before pay day and would be working in the disbursing office. He did not attend the evening movie and none of the officers had seen him after the meal hour. The quarterdeck watch had seen him about ten-thirty. The petty officer of the watch and the messenger stated that Mr. Wills had appeared on the quarterdeck about ten-thirty, in civilian clothes and carrying a suitcase. He was told a ship's boat would not be leaving until

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eleven, but had replied that friends were picking him up in their boat shortly. About five minutes after Mr. Wills came on deck, a private boat had made the gangway. He boarded it and left. Neither of the men had paid much attention to the boat. It was just a small private boat similar to a hundred others in the harbor. They had not thought the event unusual because officers often left the ship in that manner. The officer of the deck had not witnessed this since he had been on a below-decks inspection at the time.

I noticed the captain was doing a rare thing for him—taking notes. Normally, he soaked up information as if he were a computer, filing it in random parts of his mind and pulling it out at times you would least expect him to have it available. Also, he was very subdued. I attributed this to his somewhat tenuous position, for the Navy frowns heavily on commanding officers that allow their disbursing officers to lose themselves—regardless of the reasons or circumstances. The captain was literally facing the loss of twenty-six years of very hard and lonely work.

By ten-thirty, the captain had covered all the ground available. When the last of the men he had been questioning were gone, he sat scanning the notes he had taken. As he was doing this, I thought through all I had heard, and it kept coming out bad. The phone call was the worst part. Such things were too unusual in a strange port. Stretching it to a "mistake" took a lot of faith.

Each bit, individually, had been innocent enough, but now that I was putting them all together it was difficult to hold onto my belief in Mr. Wills. Being honest with myself, I had to recognize that my feelings were based on the fact that I had been impressed with the young man and liked him. He was not afraid of work, thought of his men, enjoyed responsibility and showed all the marks of a leader. We needed more like him, and it was these attributes that had guided me in weighing his honesty. Maybe a hundred thousand or so dollars overbalances a lot of things. Particularly if it's needed badly enough—which was the missing piece. Why did he change so suddenly? But the only person who knew that was Wills himself. Maybe we would have a chance to ask him.

The captain brought me out of my thoughts by rearing back in his chair, locking his hands behind his neck and saying, "All right, Jim. Form your board and get a shipfitter. Let's cut the safe open."

I guess I still had a small glim-

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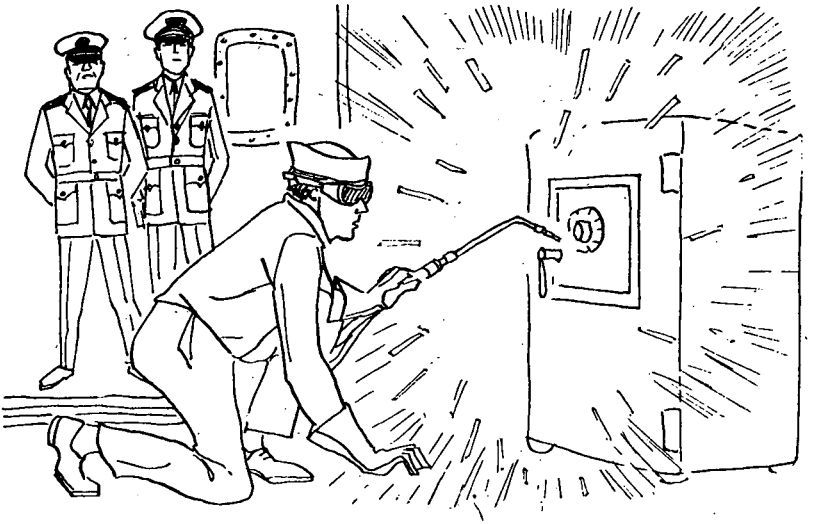

mer of faith left, for I found myself saying, "Captain, you wouldn't want to wait until noon, would you? He might show up, and another hour or so wouldn't be unreasonable to wait."

"Jim," the captain said patiently, "I admired and liked that young man also. But you know we have everything we need."

"Yes, sir." I got up feeling very tired and left his cabin.

It took a while to open the safe. Case steel does not cut easily. The door just finally seemed to get tired of the cutting flame and swung open. The inventory board went into session and began to wade through the contents of the safe. A little after one o'clock we were finished and I went to find the captain. I located him sitting in his chair on the starboard wing of the bridge, gazing on the green terraced hills of Sasebo. The sun glinted on his gray hair and his eyes looked tired as he turned his head to watch me come up the ladder.

"Good afternoon, Captain."

"Good afternoon, Commander. What did you find?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but the money is missing. It appears to be a bit over a hundred and ten thousand. We'll have an exact count shortly."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir. His gun, blank checks, money orders and stamps are all there. All he took was the money. I still find it very hard to believe, but Mr. Wills is gone."

The captain looked back at the

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hills and got down from his chair. He stretched and said sadly, "Yes . . . I am afraid he is gone."

"With your permission, I'll notify the naval investigative group and start the search. I suppose he had a way out of Japan set for last night, but maybe he slipped up. The sooner we put out the net the better."

"That will not be necessary, Commander. I believe I know where he is." The captain ignored my startled expression and said, "Just have them send two agents out to the ship, and contact the fuel pier. Tell them I require a berth to unload 'black oil' on an emergency basis. As soon as you do that, set the special sea and anchor details. I want to get under way for the pier as soon as possible." He turned and hurried down the ladder, leaving me no time to ask questions.

Our request threw the fuel pier into something of a panic. We were a large fleet oiler holding over seven million gallons of fuel, of which four million was "black oil". However, they moved fast and less than two hours later we were ready to start pumping. I reported this to the captain and he gave permission to begin. Before I left his cabin, I said, "I think I know what you're doing, but I'm not sure why."

"Sometimes I wonder about my ideas also, Jim. And I sure as hell had better be right with this one. Let's just wait and see what happens."

The unloading went rapidly. The captain had changed into old clothes and was personally checking each tank as it was emptied.

A little after ten that night, we caught the petty officer and the messenger of last night's watch as they tried to go over the fantail. They had the money with them.

About midnight, we found the weighted body of Ensign Wills wedged in the thick oil muck between a tank beam and the heating pipes in the center section of number seven tank. This was a big tank, over thirty-five feet deep and holding almost five hundred thousand gallons of "black oil". His body looked like a black pile of oily rags as we laid it on deck, but the smell of death overrode the heavy odor of oil.

It was almost two in the morning before we had everything wrapped up and the reports finished. I took the messages up to the captain and he signed them. As he handed the papers back to me, I said, "That was a nice piece of work."

"It would have been better if we could have saved Mr. Wills," he replied thoughtfully.

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"I don't think that was possible. You did the best for him you could. He has a clean name and we have the men who did it." The captain did not reply, so I continued quietly, "I still don't understand how you were so sure where to find him."

"To be honest, Jim, I wasn't certain. The tanks were just the most likely places. It would be a year before they were cleaned and he never would have been found until they were empty. That gave them plenty of time to get away. With ships dropping anchors all over the anchorage spot, there was too much chance one would snag him if they simply put him in the water, and they knew divers go down in those areas also. No, six fathoms of 'black oil' was a much better place to hide a body."

"Which leads to the next question, Captain. I never believed Ensign Wills had taken the money until we inventoried the safe. Then, learning the money was gone, I never doubted that anyone but Wills had taken it. Yet, the money being gone was what seemed to satisfy you that Wills was the victim and not the thief."

"Not the money, Jim—rather the fact that the blank checks were still there. It is quite possible that if they had also taken the checks, I would have lost faith in my theory and started looking for Wills. You see, I was counting on the fact that most of us are not impressed by a blank government check. They frighten us with all the numbers and symbols, and actually seem to represent more trouble than value. To a disbursing officer, however, they are worth more than money. They take up less space and, with the special authorization number a disbursing officer holds, are easy to cash for almost any amount. Also, it would have taken at least a day to warn the banks. I was fairly certain that if Wills had taken the money, the checks would have been gone too. So, with the checks still in the safe, I knew he couldn't be far away. Since we had not heard from him, he was probably dead, and no one had had time to move him. And if someone saw him leave and we had the body to show he hadn't gone . . ."

"Yes. They didn't stand up too long after we started unloading. The surprising thing to me was how long they had been planning it—even to the phone call."

"Not really. Robbing the paymaster is akin to planning the perfect murder. Men discuss it all the time. It's an interesting subject—almost a game—a problem to work out which involves a confined area with most variables known. Most people do it for fun. The problem

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in this case was that they went too far and began to believe their plan would work. It seemed too simple to fail: both arrange for a night watch just before pay day; after taps, when the officer of the deck left for his inspection tour, one of them would hold down the watch while the other caught Mr. Wills alone; the watch is armed, so they legally had the weapons to make him give up the money; the next part got harder, but all that was left was to knock him on the head, wire him up with weights and drop him in an oil tank. Later, when the search started, they could report he had left the ship under circumstances that pointed strongly to him having the money. Who would think to doubt the word of two men on watch? By all rights, we should have set out in full cry looking for Mr. Wills everywhere but on board ship. It sounds easy, but as in most plans of that type there is usually a flaw, an unknown variable. In this case it was me and a 'sea story'."

He paused and shook his head slowly.

"You know, Jim, the Navy is big and has been in business a long time. If a man listens to all the 'sea stories' sailors tell, he will eventually hear almost everything that can happen. So, if I had to admit how I knew where to find Mr. Wills, I would have to say that someone told me in China in 1946. I don't even remember who it was, but one night in a bar in Shanghai I heard a story about two men who tried the same thing on a tanker in the Philippines. They were caught when the ship went aground, the tanks split open and the body floated out. There were too many similarities between that story and what was happening on our ship to be ignored. The bad part is that I didn't anticipate the problem. That's what captains are for."

He had showered and changed clothes since coming out of the tanks, but the smell of "black oil" was heavy in the cabin.

"Yeah, that's what bothers me, Jim—that I didn't save Mr. Wills." He looked down sadly. "I'll have a lot of trouble washing this oil off my hands."

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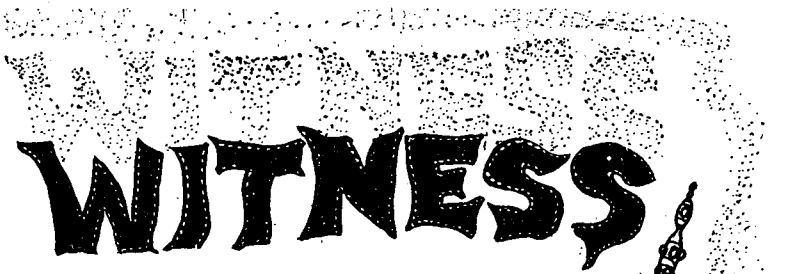
The concepts of the upper social strata are not, apparently, completely inscrutable to those of lesser status.



by Lee Chisholm

FOR A MOMENT the sight nearly took my breath away. The next minute I could feel my usual idiotic grin spreading over my homely face and I wondered what the cops would say. I had stopped to light a cigarette, glanced in the high, narrow window of the fashionable boutique, and there she was—she and the corpse, that is.

Francine Boucher Stafford, one of The Beautiful People, *membre extraordinaire* of the international jet-set and all the rest of that drivel they use to describe the rich and famous unemployed leisured class, was just about the richest and most famous of all. Mrs. Harold Stafford also belonged to The Beautiful People in the truest sense of the word. Her skin was creamy-white against the great mane of long auburn hair that framed her face, and her features had the strong, clean look of some ancient Celtic queen.

Well, just standing there looking at her, and wearing my stupid grin, I almost forgot to peruse the corpse, but he was there too, very much in evidence in the shadows of the closed shop, stretched out on

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the floor with a jeweled dagger in his back and Francine Stafford's white hand clasped around the handle. From where I stood, he didn't look half as interesting as Francine, even with the addition of a jeweled dagger, because Francine was, indeed, all woman.

I push cab here in High City, or I did. It's a ritzy resort town a couple of good spits inland from San Francisco, all very posh and private, with a man-made lake and Spanish haciendas rimmed around a golf course, you know the sort of thing. That's just for the rich tourists, of course. We natives still cool our burning feet in Dobson's Creek and beat the heat by fanning ourselves with newspapers on the back porch, but having this high-class playland development on the outskirts has definitely made the whole town a lot more tony, fancy stores and stuff, you know.

But never mind that, where was I? Oh yes, Francine Boucher Stafford. I knew she must be close to 40, but did she look it? No. Not a day of it—like wow, man!—which is why I wasn't all that interested in the corpse.

I knew him, same as most people in High City. He was what they call in the newspapers a *flamboyant figure* and this here Gold Rush Boutique was his place of business; that is, if you can call selling women a lot of leather stuff stitched together with cowhide thongs, a business. His name was Martin Ulster. He wore his hair long, his mustache full and his clothes colorful. Oh man, were they colorful! Picture a tall willow-wand of a guy in a bright blue *Olde California* frontier shirt laced with leather thongs (you guessed

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it) at the chest and wearing brick red (so help me) *Olde California* laced denims. This is Martin Ulster, lean of flank, hawk of nose and dark of eye, and the women loved him! Don't ask me why. The serious study of women for most of my thirty-six years has made me nutty enough as it is. But no kidding, this guy descends on High City about eighteen months ago to open up a weirdo, overpriced boutique for the rich and favored dames ensconced in our wealthy playground outside of town, and what happens? Every local *hausfrau* and her daughter has to have an *Olde California* creation by Martin Ulster. When I think of the money . . .

Well, never mind that, but imagine this wild scene: Me standing there looking in, wearing my stupid grin and wondering what the cops would say, but managing to ogle Francine Stafford plenty while debating what to do . . . move off and forget it, or make like a good solid citizen and report it . . . but I grinned and ogled and lingered too long. One minute this Francine babe is on her knees bending over the body, the next she's on her feet looking right at me—and what a look! Like a tigress, body motionless like she's ready to spring right through the window, her cold, glittering green eyes bored into mine. It's enough to scare a guy. I felt like a piece of red meat framed in the window, late evening sunlight behind me etching me all too clearly, while she stood with the shadows of the darkened shop behind her, a light burning somewhere in an office to the rear. I started to back away, feeling my lunatic grin harden into something more like a grimace of fear.

What does she do, but raise her hand and crook her finger at me, gesturing *Come here,* just like some teacher in grade school and me an errant pupil. I tell you, it was too much. I remember shaking my head as if to say, *You've got to be kidding,* but this gorgeous Francine babe stamps her foot and shakes her head at me, and points firmly to the door, meaning, *Get in here this minute!*

Like someone in a dream I went to the door. She opened it from the inside, almost yanked me in by the sleeve and banged it closed behind me, snapping the lock and leaving the drawn shade flapping against the frame.

I stood there stupidly, feeling outsize and out of place in the narrow, feminine surroundings. Although I'm not that big a guy, that's how you feel with your feet sunk ankle-deep in carpet, surrounded by racks of dresses and half-draped female forms wearing

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bits and pieces of leather. It wasn't my bag, as the saying goes.

I stole a look at the long, still form lying kitty-corner to the display window and felt my forehead break out in a sweat. Swallowing, I looked away, realizing that what might seem like a Hitchcock movie from the outside, scary, but not without its humor, was nothing like being in the act for real.

Francine Boucher Stafford's clipped, cool, finishing-school voice broke through my wavering confusion. "This is not what you think it is," she said crisply.

"No, of course not," I agreed, and put my sweaty hands in my jacket pockets. It was very hot in there and it occurred to me that the air-conditioning had been turned off, which was natural, I suppose. It was after hours and the shop was closed, but with a corpse lying there . . . I gave myself a mental shake.

"Do you know who I am?" Francine Stafford had come around to stand directly in front of me, hands on the hips of her leather midi-skirt, her firm, full bosom pulsating in a knit, leather-trimmed top.

Five hundred dollars' worth of leather, I estimated looking at her, at the same time faltering out an answer, "Yes . . ." She was definitely in control, this babe, and I let her be, already regretting my impetuous move into the shop.

"I was afraid of that," she said, staring at me with something next to loathing. "I could tell it by your riveted glance through the window. One gets to know when one is recognized."

"Sure," I said again; anything to be agreeable. Licking my lips, I shot another hasty glance at the body.

"I told you this is not what you think it is, and I told you the truth."

I noticed she kept her head turned away from the late Martin Ulster and I guessed that under her highbrow calm, she was a little shook up herself.

"I came in here not three minutes ago and found him myself," she continued. "Then you looked through the window and saw me. Naturally, I had to motion you in to explain, before you set off some kind of unnecessary and ill-advised alarm."

Unnecessary and ill-advised alarm . . . I looked at her and some of my usual cynicism must have showed in my face.

"Martin Ulster is dead," she said quietly. "Quite dead. I ascertained that for myself. There is nothing anyone can do for him now. But there is something you can do for me. Say nothing about this, noth-

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ing at all. Don't report it. Go your way as if nothing had happened."

"In other words, forget I saw you here?"

"Exactly. I can make it worth your while, not to buy you off as witness to a murder, but to convince you that I had nothing to do with it. Martin and I were friends, better than friends. Partners, you might say. I knew him when and he knew me when. I helped set him up in this shop, but our association was secret. You do understand how these things go?" She pinned me with a cool, green glance that spoke volumes about how these things went between her and Martin Ulster.

"Sure." I gave her my worldly taxi-driver's grin. Pushing cab at night for ten years makes you a third party to lots of "secret associations" and soon teaches you the high profit in tips for keeping your mouth shut. I stood there sweating in the heat of the closed shop, perspiration rolling down my back while I angled myself into the shadow of a dress rack for cover since people were still going by in the fading light outside, knowing that the biggest tip of my life was coming up. It wouldn't be a crumpled ten or twenty either, pressed into my hand with a conspiratorial wink. This time I had hit the jackpot and I aimed to make the most of it. I cared nothing for Martin Ulster, dead or alive, but money . . . Well, man, that's something else again.

"Good. I see you're a man of the world, Mister . . . ?" Francine Stafford joined me in my shadow and, stepping close to me, looked up into my face, or maybe I should say across into my face. She's a big babe, that girl; an amazon with a pearly overlay of culture, if you know what I mean. She waited for me to give my name.

"Let's call me Mister Anonymous," I said. "I don't want you to look me up sometime and make Victim Number Two."

"Oh, you idiot! You're stupid!" The green eyes flashed and I could see she was on the verge of having one of her famous tantrums, but with a sudden lapse into coldness she controlled herself. "So you still don't believe me?"

"Look, what's it matter if I do or I don't? From where I stand, it looks like a woman's crime. Stabbing somebody in the back with a pretty little jeweled dagger is just the kind of thing some wildly jealous female might do. This guy Ulster was a mover and a shaker. Lots of jealous dames would be glad to see him breathe his last, for the simple reason that he got tired of 'em and went on to greener pastures. *Hell hath no fury like a*

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woman scorned . . . and all that jazz."

"So you quote poetry too?" She looked me over coolly, an expression of studied insult on her face and a flash of contempt in her eyes for my shapeless old tweed jacket and the bag in the knees of my drip-dry slacks. "What are you, a poor man's philosopher of some sort?"

"No ma'am," I said, giving her my idiotic smile which always reassures 'em that I'm harmless, to a point. "Just a poor man."

I heard the relieved release of her breath, which said quite plainly that slobs like me she could deal with. We could be bought and sold, something she was very adept in. I waited, like the good slob I was, for my payoff while she opened the deep pouch slung over her shoulder and took out her wallet.

"Here," she said, almost emptying the wallet of bills and plunging them into my hand, "this is all I have. Take it."

In the glimmer of light from the back of the store I could make out five one-hundred-dollar bills, a couple of twenties and a ten. My unhappy silence conveyed my disappointment.

"Please," she said earnestly, "that's all I've got with me. I have to keep these . . ." she showed me two twenties still in her wallet, "to get back to town. There's a big party there tonight, a major social event thrown by some boring social climber. I was planning to skip it, have already begged off, in fact. But now I've got to make it somehow. Have my picture taken. Be seen . . ." Her voice wandered off, and her anxiety to get away from High City and make a very big scene far away in the big city just sort of hung there between us; embarrassing, in a way, for someone like Francine Boucher Stafford to be in a spot like this.

"You might get back in time," I volunteered, "but you're sure to be recognized at the airport."

"I'm not going by air," she said. "I'm driving my maid's car."

So, I thought, learning something new every minute. This is how these high-society ladies get around on the sly. Drive the maid's car and probably carry all the maid's ID as well, just in case. Maids, like taxi drivers, can be very understanding too . . . for a price.

"Well?" she said impatiently, her voice going a little shrill.

"Well, what?" I replied, shuffling my feet and folding my arms across my chest like someone prepared to stay a while, although by now the place was stifling hot and my own nerves were strung out like so much piano wire on a Stein-

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way. I knew I had her and I was in a priceless position to wheel and deal . . . *if I* could just keep my own mind and eyes off the shadowy hunk of corpse over by the window.

"Well, is it a deal? Will you take the money and say nothing, and let us *both* get out of here?"

I guess she pretty well saw through my pose of assumed nonchalance, but it was still my ball game and she knew it.

"No, not quite," I said, as if giving the matter a good deal of thought. "There's a lot at stake here: your lily-white reputation as Mrs. Untouchable Harold Stafford, fine old family name, et cetera, et cetera, above and beyond the rest of us human kind; and my own reputation as a solid citizen . . ."

"What do you do for a living?" she interrupted harshly.

"I drive a taxi, ma'am," I said with as much pride as I could muster under the circumstances, we cabdrivers being put down far too much for our supposed unscrupulous dealings and lack of human sensitivity.

"I should have known," she said coldly, and her scorn would have shriveled the skin on a crocodile's back. "What do you want, then?"

"I think my silence in this unfortunate situation is worth a lot more than five hundred and fifty dollars. A *lot* more, if you get what I mean?" I gave her my special taxi-driver leer. It had loosened up a few pockets before.

"Leech," she said conversationally. "Parasitic leech."

"Whatever you say," I replied, prepared to be amiable and gentlemanly to the end. "So, for openers, how about that hunk of ice on your third finger, left hand? Looks like the Foxworth diamond that all the publicity was about. Fenced through certain channels that I happen to know of, and probably having to be cut, it wouldn't bring the cool million clams your loving hubby paid for it, but even so, the pittance it would bring could keep me on easy street for the rest of my life. Not your brand of easy street, Mrs. Stafford, but mine. I'm a man of simple needs."

This time it was her turn. "You have to be kidding," she said derisively. "This is a paste copy, but even if it were the genuine Foxworth diamond, even *if it were* . . ." she paused to give the stressed words extra special effect, "I wouldn't be able to give it away or sell it on my own initiative. Harry . . . my husband, would wonder immediately why I wasn't wearing it. The world would wonder!"

"Why couldn't you just go along wearing the paste job? Who would know the genuine article was

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gone? The fake is a fine copy."

"It would be known," she said, "almost at once." With that, she lapsed into a kind of contemplative silence and I realized that there must be security measures taken by the rich and famous to guard their precious baubles that we ordinary folks know nothing about, and I was too far down on the social scale in the human anthill even to try and guess. What did she do? Flash her hand in front of an X-ray machine every night before beddy-bye to make sure the hunk she was lugging around was still the real McCoy? Or did a jeweler in residence, bent and obsequious like some kind of paternal gnome, creep into her bedroom every night and check each bijou and baguette through a loupe glued in his eye? Whatever it was, I knew it was beyond me, and I could tell by her silence, beyond her, too.

I sighed, said good-bye to the quarter of a million I might have garnered from this caper, and gracefully settled for second best.

"But that is the real Foxworth diamond you're wearing, isn't it?"

She nodded her head yes, her face tight.

I'll say one thing for her, she was on good terms with the truth, and even in a tight spot she didn't try to kid anyone. I guess she knew she didn't have to.

"The ring is out," she said flatly.

"No, the ring is in. You will lose it. In other words, leave it with me for safekeeping. Then, desperate and distressed over your great loss, you will offer a huge reward, and who should come forward to claim it but a poor-but-honest taxi driver who finds the ring when sweeping out the back of his cab. I suggest the reward be commensurate with the value of your loss and *not* a few miserly *thou*, or the poor-but-honest cabbie might not have enough inducement to come forward. Which means, make it good! That way everybody wins. You get the ring back, I get the hefty reward money and no one is any the wiser."

"No, it won't work," she said, and I could see that she was breathing a little heavy because she was really pouring on the brain-power too. "I'd have to report the loss by tomorrow. Your coming forward would place me here in High City today, the very thing that I'm trying to avoid. 'Officially' I haven't been here in the last two months."

Gloomily I saw her point.

"You'll have to trust me on this," she said briskly. "I'll fly in unannounced this weekend to visit friends at the resort. Since no one will be expecting me, I'll take a cab out there. Your cab. We'll go

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through with the ring plan then."

I looked at her with admiration. She was cool. She was desperate, but she was cool, and I trusted her; but just to keep the edge on her I said, "Okay. I'll meet the Friday night 8:30 flight . . . and you'd better be on it. I'll take off on a fishing trip early tomorrow morning, so I won't hear the news about your friend Martin Ulster's death. I'll come back Friday for the weekend trade, which is prime time to us cab pushers. If you're not on that plane I will drop by the police station and tell 'em how shocked I am about poor old Martin, but I just heard, see, since I've been out of town fishing. But it seems to me I remember seeing a certain famous, jet-set dame hanging around Martin's store Monday evening—"

"You don't have to spell it out," she said coldly. She cast me another withering glance that, under different circumstances, would have made me feel real bad, but I figured that since this was business, she didn't mean anything personal by it.

"Friday night I'll be wearing a brown *belle epoch* wig—that's an upsweep style to you—and an orange pantsuit so you'll recognize me. I don't think anyone else will, but make it quick, just in case."

I nodded, glad I was dealing with a woman with a mind for detail, but then I guess this incognito thing was old stuff to her.

"Now, let's get out of here," she said, once more in full command. "You go first. Crawl along the floor to the back door so you won't be seen in the light from the office. I'll do the same after I get this black wig on."

She was already dragging a curly Afro-type thing out of the depths of her handbag and, instead of moving, I stood there fascinated at the transformation. Wigs, I decided, were a damned handy gadget.

"Go," she snapped, flashing those green eyes at me one last time under a new head of curly dark hair. "Get out! And don't run when you get outside or make yourself conspicuous."

"No ma'am," I agreed, and dropping to my knees, I crawled away from her and the late Martin Ulster just as fast as I could. Easing myself out the back door, I stood a minute in the shadows of the alley, gulping deep breaths of fresh air. Then, following orders to the end, I resisted the urge to run like hell, forcing myself instead to walk casually down the alleyway and blend, just as casually, with the rest of ordinary humanity on the street beyond. In my right coat pocket was the comforting bulge of five hundred and fifty dollars I hadn't

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had before, and apart from the fact that my shirt was wringing wet with perspiration, I went on my way none the worse for my little brush with murder.

The fishing was fine. I found myself some back-country up in Nevada near Tahoe and I stayed there like the good boy I had promised to be, dipping my old rod in the water and dreaming of the fat reward money to come, and thanking my lucky stars all the while for rich women and secret involvements which had to be kept hidden . . . at any price.

The price turned out to be one hundred thousand dollars. Not bad, huh? Maybe you read about it? *Honest Cabbie Wins Fat Reward!* the papers screamed. Or saw me being interviewed on television? I didn't say much, just kept shaking my head and wearing my idiot smile, mumbling about how I couldn't believe it. Again and again I kept repeating that it was just by accident that I dumped the plastic car-tidy bags in the garbage at home where the pickup is just once a week, instead of in the trash at work that gets picked up and carted off every other night. Looking stunned at my own brilliant thinking, I allowed as how with all the publicity about the missing ring and it coming out that I had actually taxied Francine Stafford to the resort (although I didn't know who she was at the time), I got to thinking about the car-tidy bags that I hang on the window handles in the back of the cab and what had happened to them that night? And how I'd gone poking through my own garbage can and saw this thing sparkling in the sunlight . . .

Francine Boucher Stafford, interviewed on network TV as she and her aging, aristocratic husband boarded a plane for an extended European holiday, allowed as how she'd blown her nose and stuck the used tissue in the car-tidy bag, *never dreaming* that her ring had come off at the same time. She almost wept out her gratitude to me, that unknown taxi driver back in High City who had returned her most precious possession, seeing as how it had come from 'her darling Harry.' If you don't think that wasn't something to see, you missed a good show. She should have had her name inscribed on an Oscar for that piece of acting!

But never mind. Live and let live, I always say. I'm not one to cast brickbats, seeing as how I'm a wealthy man myself now (in a manner of speaking) and have an *Olde California* shop of my own. No, not leather fashions for ladies. That's still not my bag. I've got a wig shop, would you believe it?

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Wigs for gentlemen as well as ladies; handy gadgets that can cover up more than a bald spot, if you know what I mean. It's doing well too, although opening it up was kind of a sentimental gesture on my part, seeing as how wigs played a role in my good fortune. I'm pretty well versed in wiggery talk now, know a 'belle epoch' from a 'fall' and a 'pixie' from an 'Afro.' But I'm not in the shop too much. I leave that to the hired hands.

Mostly I travel with my wife, Mary. She always wanted to see the world from the back seat of a taxi, not the front, if you get the connection. Now I can afford to give it to her and leave the cab-pushing to someone else. Besides, Mary was pretty shook up over Martin Ulster's death, it being High City's lone unsolved murder and all. It does her good to get away, especially since she was planning on going anyway—not with me, of course—but with Martin.

Yep, my own Mary, small and slender with soft mousey-colored hair and big blue eyes; she, not any of those sleek, well-preserved society dames, was the big thing in Martin Ulster's life. He told me that himself just before he died. And as I told him (just before knocking him out with one well-placed blow to the solar plexus and another to the side of his head as he went down) it was just too bad he happened to fix on my wife because I wasn't the easy-loser type. It's a wonder someone didn't look in and see us fighting there in the front of the closed shop, then the witness to be paid off would have been someone else and I would have been doing the paying!

But things work out for the best, I always say. When he went down, I saw that dagger doodad on a display and finished him off. It looked like the sort of thing a jealous woman might do and, knowing his reputation, I aimed to extricate myself as best I could; but whatever his faults, I was certainly grateful to his masterly sense of discretion which kept his association with Mary a deep, dark secret.

It was only dumb luck that in returning to my cab later, stopping to light a cigarette to pull myself together, I'd glanced in to see someone else bending over the body—someone who couldn't afford to be seen, someone who had to pay off a witness. But that's me; dumb and lucky and the only witness to the same murder, twice on the same night.

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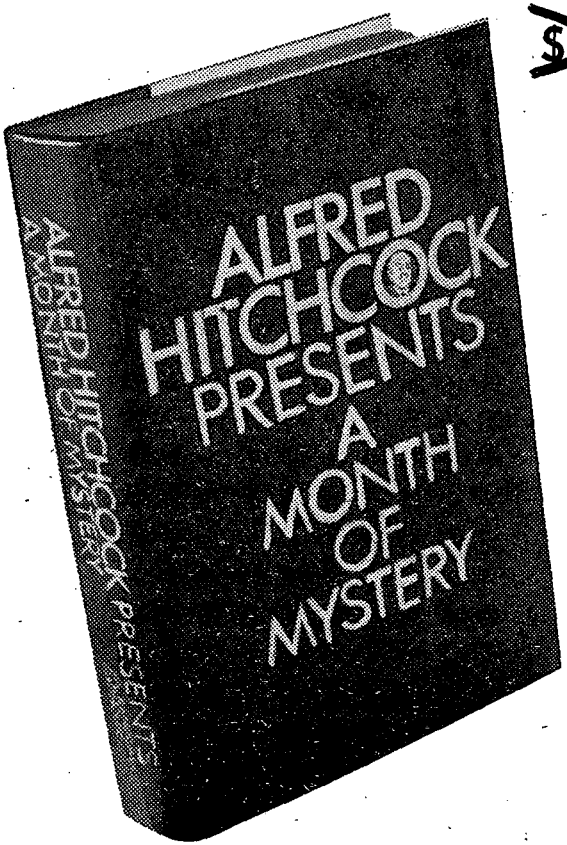

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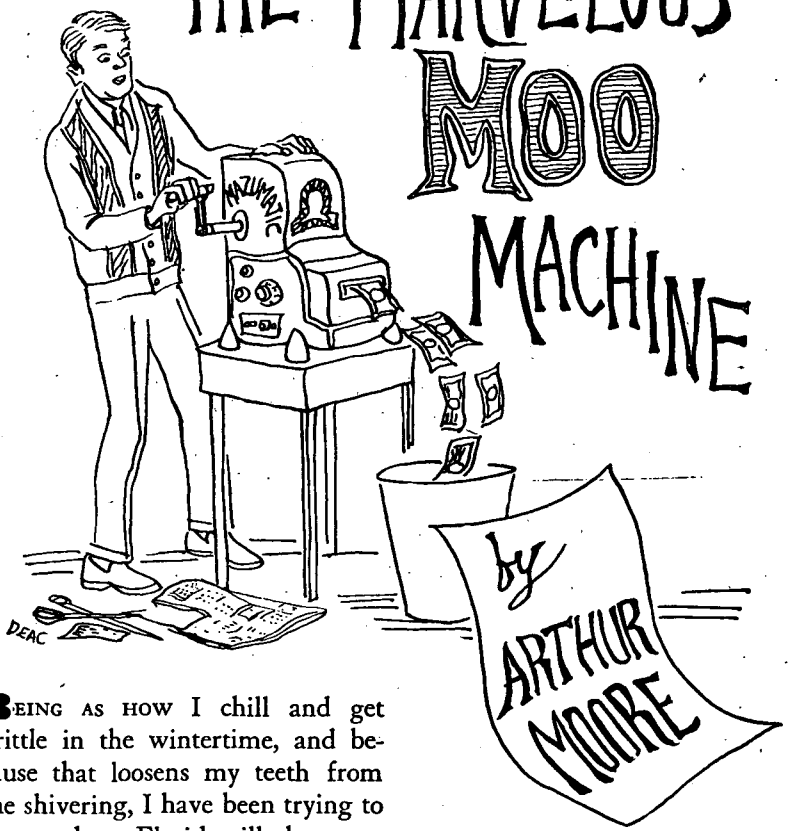
Under a clear blue sky a friendly angel, at times, may bear a marked resemblance to a pigeon.

THE MARVELOUS MOO MACHINE



BEING AS HOW I chill and get brittle in the wintertime, and because that loosens my teeth from the shivering, I have been trying to get south to Florida till the snow season blows over, but there is always something that comes up to

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keep me from it—like dough. What I mean is, the dough does not come up.

There has got to be a change, I figure. This summer I have collected fifty clams of the necessary choo-choo fare, and eighteen more will do the trick. I can scrape that up by certain clever manipulations, like bumming hamburgers for two weeks, and dodging my landlady who has got a rent fixation.

While I am planning thus, I remember the marvelous moo machine.

This invention is a gizmo called a Mazumatic—it says so on the top by the handle. It is supposed to make mazuma out of practically anything, only it doesn't—for me. However, it does when Blue-Sky Conners sells it to me for Jacksons, back-to-back. In fact, it is almost worth the forty clams just to watch and listen to his demonstration.

He is an artist, but he is now wearing a loud, striped suit in one of them fuzz-bound Sing-Sing type blockhouses, and is not available for consultations.

Naturally I remember some of his pitch. "Dubois," says Blue-Sky, as I hand him the loot, "I want you should promise me one thing, for the good of the country."

"What?"

"Take it easy with this here geetus machine. You have got like a responsibility. Don't make more greenies than you need on account of you could louse up and ruin the economy of our fifty fair and faithful."

It touches me that Blue-Sky is a patriot. When the chips are down, even the slickest citizen rallies like a rocket to the red-white-and-blue. While I am fondling the Mazumatic and thinking this line, Blue-Sky pockets my moo and eases out to the subway, which is the last I hear of him, except for a kind of laugh—but I don't remember that till later.

So suddenly the machine don't work. I cut some newspapers to the size of real green-berries, and run them through just like Blue-Sky did. Nothing comes out but the crummy newspaper.

The only time it works right is when I put in real folding lettuce, but of course that is defeating the purpose of the whole dodge. I cannot explain that enough: that the gimmick is to put in any old paper and take out real bucks, but I can never get the stupid machine to do it that way.

Well, after I struggle with this device for a few days, I am naturally becoming suspicious. I take Jonesy, the barkeep, aside and as soon as I tell him about the machine he starts laughing, but later he comes to my room and runs a

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few old newspapers through it just to be on the safe side.

"You have been took, Dubois," he says. "These here automatic moo machines never work. I'll give you a buck and a half for it."

I shake my head.

Jonesy says, "It ain't gonna improve with age. I can use it as a conversation piece on the bar."

I tell him to forget it. There is no doubt in my mind what the conversation will be about, and I do not wish my name to be coupled with a dumb thing like a phony money-maker. So I shove the thing on a shelf so it can hold up its share of the dust, and I make Jonesy promise not to tell anyone what a sucker I am.

A week later I hear that Left Foot Hamish has been spotted coming from the track loaded with gilt-edged geetus. He has stumbled across a winner.

It is a neon omen in the sky. It is like one of them dreams where a friendly angel, knee-deep in fog, hands you a list of tomorrow's winners. Left Foot is a pigeon.

Naturally I shove the Mazumatic moo-making gadget into a paper sack and head for Katzie's Saloon. Left Foot is bound to be there, and Left Foot is about as bright as the brass work on a live bait barge. With the pitch I remember from Blue-Sky, I will have him cold. My only worry is that some other smart con type will beat me to his pocket.

When I reach Katzie's, I look in the window and Left Foot is sitting at a front table, cozied up to a bucket of suds, smiling at the world. I know I have got to him first, but I pause and stop in the alley, just for a minute, to check over the machine, nothing should go wrong. I slide in a piece of paper and turn the crank—just to be on the safe side on account of I haven't tested the thing in days—but it doesn't do it. The paper still comes out paper.

So I load the gimmick with a couple of real dollar bills to con Left Foot with, and I am ready.

Jonesy calls me over when I appear, and I show him what I got in the paper sack. He winks and giggles and points out Left Foot like he thinks I am blind.

Left Foot is pleased to see me and springs for a lager with no boost at all.

"I have hit the bangtails," he says, chortling like a stripteaser with two navels. "What's in the sack?"

"Your future," I say, trying to think like Blue-Sky. I place the Mazumatic on the table between us and lower my voice. "This is your lucky day, Left Foot. You won at the track, now you're

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gonna win some more dough here."

He is fascinated. "What is it?" He reaches for the handle but I grab his arm.

"It's a cabbage creator. It makes coin of the realm."

"Jinglers or foldin' stuff?"

"Spending paper," I say, looking into his watery eyes. "The long, green sugar-coated wampum. Portraits of G. Washington, which are exactly wallet size. I am lettin' it go for a twenny on account of we are pals." I am trying to remember Blue-Sky's patter. It ain't comin' out like he said it, but there is a dim resemblance and anyhow Left Foot don't know the difference.

"It makes moo?" he asks, very suspicious.

"Every time. You got twenny bucks, ain't you?"

He shows it to me, but he clutches it close.

"Listen," I explain, "I am leavin' for Florida in the morning, but when I seen you in here I said to myself, 'Dubois, you gotta let Left Foot in on this windfall'."

"Why?" he asks.

"Because we're pals. Lemme show you what this here machine can do." I take out a buck-size piece of newspaper and feed it into the machine while Left Foot watches very intent. When I turn the handle and the silver certificate comes rolling out the other end, he gets popeyed. He grabs the lettuce and drools over it like a blonde with a square-cut.

"Holy Toledo!" he whistles. "This here is real frogskin!"

I look very casual. "Wha'd I tell you? We're pals, aren't we?"

"We are now," he says. "Will it do it again?"

"Natch. Only you got to let the insides cool off for a couple of minutes." I look at Jonesy's clock on the wall, remembering that Blue-Sky made me wait five minutes before using the machine—which is just time for him to get outa sight.

He rustles the dough in his hot hand. "An' it's for sale?"

"I tole you, huh?" I am getting more casual all the time, watching him drool over the device. When the minutes are up I roll in another chunk of newspaper and the second mint berry comes out like it's supposed to. Left Foot grabs it and gives it the same look-feel treatment.

Then he slaps the twenty bank hides into my hand.

I get up, triumphant. Ah, Florida! "But remember," I warn him, "wait five minutes." I pocket the happy-cabbage and scoot. He is staring at the moo-maker, twitching a little to twirl the crank.

Outside on the street, I mate the twenty with the rest of my gelt. I now have the requisite sixty-eight

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iron men and my Florida trip is in the bag. I can feel the sunshine and see the sharks chasin' them dolls up and down the beach, nipping at the bikinis.

I cannot resist watching Left Foot through the window. Jonesy has come over and is helping him stare at the clock. As soon as the time is up, Left Foot cranks the handle. I blink, because a greenie comes out. Left Foot does a little dance around the table and Jonesy is trembling visibly.

A terrible cold hand grabs my spine, because Left Foot is holding up a five dollar bill!

I shake my head to clear this picture from it. I feel like I am tuned to the wrong station. There are little knobs on the Mazumatic that Blue-Sky twiddled, but I was positive they were phony . . .

When I look again, Left Foot is cranking the thing. I can hear his shout. He has cranked out another five spot!

I spin around and run into the wall, trying to get through the door. "Hey!" I yell at them. "I sold you the wrong machine!"

Left Foot is pulling another fiver out when I charge in and grab up the moo-maker.

"Leggo!" Left Foot screams. "That's mine!"

"I'm buyin' it back," I shout, and I shove all my cabbage at him. Who cares? Now the gizmo makes five spots. I shove the Mazumatic under my arm like a football and duck under Jonesy's arm. They are both yelling as I head for the door.

I hear a kind of a laugh behind me as I run down the street—but I don't remember that till later.

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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

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It is a rarity, indeed, when one of strong conviction can continue faithful to his persuasion without a disruptive challenge.

A MAN OF CONVICTIONS

by Lee R. Ellis

DETECTIVE FRANK GULLARD pulled the police car through traffic. The detective was of medium size, except for the thickness which had gradually settled under his belt. Gullard intended to reduce after his retirement; meanwhile, he tried to hide the bulge under his suit coat.

He had been surprised to hear from Sue Mannix. He knew the woman had been released from prison after serving seven years, but it was unusual for an ex-con to invite Detective Gullard to his home.

There had been a story lately about Sue Mannix. An aunt had left her a sizable sum of money, to be paid when Sue had been

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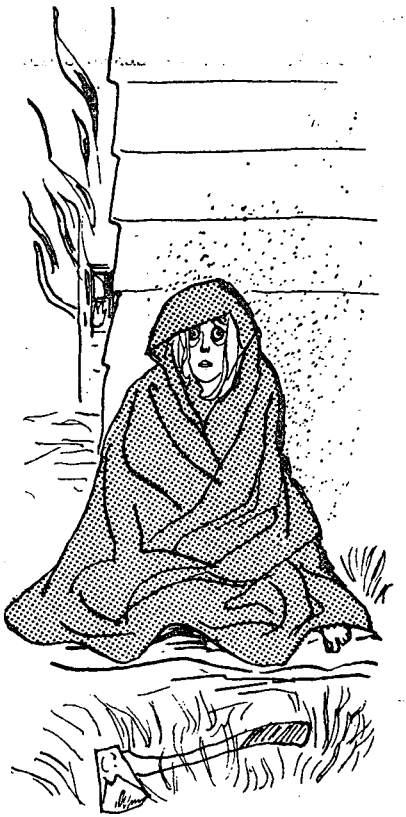
deemed fully rehabilitated. The governor had done his part by granting the woman a full pardon, a move Gullard disapproved. He felt a convicted criminal should not be coddled.

The detective was driving out to see Sue Mannix partly from curiosity. He wondered what seven years had done to the thin, pretty young woman. Gullard also welcomed the chance to get away from the station. He wanted to skip an assignment to an involved case since he intended to coast in, then end his police career in a blaze of glory at the testimonial dinner next Wednesday.



The dinner was to be a big affair. The speeches, already written, called for the chief to commend Frank Gullard for his thirty years of devotion to the force, and to name him 'Watchdog of Justice'. Captains and lieutenants in full-dress uniform would rise and refer to Gullard as 'Mister Law and Order', and the police commissioner was slated to designate the retiring detective as 'The Unflagging Guardian of Orderly Society'. It was due to be a great affair, a night such as comes to few men, and Frank Gullard knew he would carry the memory of this night to his grave.

Gullard forced his mind away from the dinner, and back to Sue Mannix. He had not seen her since the courtroom. She had changed—prison changed them all, especially the young women.

Detective Frank Gullard remembered the night of the fire and of Sue Mannix's arrest well. That had been a date burned into his mind, a day of bitter memory, for on that day Gullard's own wife, Virginia, had obtained her divorce.

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At that time Gullard and young Tom Barstow were teamed on homicide. It had been shortly before midnight when the call came in.

The two officers responded and drove to Lonepeak Canyon Road. A short distance inside the canyon mouth, they found a home blazing. When they arrived on the scene, the firemen were mainly concerned in knocking down brush fires. The garage still stood, but the home was gutted.

A fire chief met the detectives. "I called you," he said. "There's a body in the front bedroom." The fireman jerked his head toward the roaring flames.

Young Tom Barstow whipped out his notebook. "Do you have an identity on the victim?"

"We think it is the fellow who owned the house, a Ronnie Mannix. The body was in bed, but the place was completely involved when we arrived. It was too hot to enter."

"In bed?" Tom Barstow said. "That means the victim could have been smoking."

"It doesn't look like that kind of a blaze. The arson squad will check that end of it."

"Why did you call us, then?" Gullard growled.

"Come over here, I'll show you why." The fireman led the way across the hose lines and went behind the garage. Here the heat was less intense, but the spot was still lighted with a red glow, with leaping shadows. A figure sat huddled on the ground, wrapped in a blanket. It was a young woman with a thin face, who stared up at the men with round, grey eyes.

"We found her out here," the fireman said.

Tom Barstow had his notebook out again. "Was she like this?"

"No, we gave her the blanket. She was lying on the ground, either unconscious or faking it." The fireman walked a few steps away and pointed down. "But this is really why I called you."

The two officers walked over and Gullard saw a small hatchet, the boy scout kind, lying in the grass. The metal head was smeared with a gummy fluid and there was a smudge on the handle.

Tom Barstow knelt down. "I'll call the photogs," he said. "Then I'll wrap this up and shoot it to the print lab."

Gullard walked back and stood over the woman. She was smaller and younger than Virginia, her hair was ash blonde, Virginia's hair was black. "Who are you?" he demanded.

The woman tried to get to her feet and at the same time hold the blanket around her body. Gullard

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waited in silence. She fell back heavily but finally let the blanket go and got to her feet. Dressed in thin sleeping pajamas, she shivered in the chill night air. "My name is Sue Mannix," she said in an unsure, thin voice.

Tom Barstow stepped over, scooped up the blanket and placed it over Sue's shoulders.

"How did you get out here?" Gullard asked.

Sue Mannix stared at the ground. "I don't know," she said and wiped her hand across her eyes. "I don't remember, I was asleep."

"Where do you sleep?"

"In the rear bedroom."

"Where does your husband sleep?"

"Ronnie has been sleeping in the front bedroom." Sue shook her head and stepped to where she could see the fire. She stared at the blazing house. "Ronnie," she said and gave a small cry. She looked around. "Where is my husband?" Sue's body sagged, and as she tottered back, Tom Barstow caught her in his arms.

The young detective led Sue over to a neighbor woman. He left the girl and turned to his partner. "She won't run off," he said harshly.

Gullard didn't answer. He had walked back to study the hatchet on the ground.

The next morning, when Gullard opened his eyes a wave of bitterness swept over him as he saw the bare, bachelor apartment. Virginia would be cozy in the home he had worked so hard to pay for; Virginia would have uncracked plaster, lawns, flower gardens and the workshop in the basement. Frank Gullard had *this*.

The detective showered and dressed, and although the apartment had a kitchenette, he ate breakfast at the corner lunchroom, as usual.

Official duty hours would not begin until three o'clock that afternoon, but since the basement workshop had been his only hobby, Gullard was left with nothing to do. He drove out to Lonepeak Canyon Road and when he turned in at the scene of last night's fire, he found another car in the drive. Two men were poking in the ruins and they identified themselves as investigators with the arson squad.

"What have you found so far?" Gullard asked.

"Incendiary," the first man said without hesitation. "Someone poured an inflammable liquid over the woodwork."

"Probably gasoline," the second man said. "We found an empty five-gallon can behind the garage. A couple of the firemen reported they smelled gasoline when they first

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got here. It was really doused."

"When the torch was put to it, the house must have exploded into flame."

The second man shook his head. "That poor devil in the front bedroom didn't have a chance."

"Did they take him away?" Gullard asked.

The first man nodded. "They picked up the body as soon as the boys could get things cooled down enough to get in."

Detective Gullard walked carefully across the debris to the spot where the front bedroom had been. There was a heat-twisted set of box springs and a clump of cotton batting that had been protected by the body.

Gullard pulled the cotton apart, then sifted the ashes around the springs through his fingers. He found an oblong, metal object and rubbed it on his sleeve until he could make out the raised design. It was a dove with the wings spread, encircled by an olive wreath, on a medallion which was made to be worn around the neck. He dropped the piece into his pocket and continued the search.

Half an hour later Gullard gave up and drove down to the Foothill Division Station. He and Tom Barstow had booked Sue Mannix in the night before, and when Gullard found the prisoner had not been taken downtown, he requested permission to question her. Permission was granted.

Sue Mannix had waived the right to have an attorney present. She was brought into the interrogation room, pale and shaken. It was apparent she hadn't slept, and her ash-blonde hair looked more tousled than combed. She sat down warily, gripped the edge of the table with both hands, then sat in silence and stared across the table.

"Why did you kill your husband?"

"I didn't kill anyone. I swear I didn't!"

"You and your husband had a fight last night."

Sue shook her head. "No, no we didn't. Ronnie was extra nice last night—he even brought me my warm milk." Sue stopped her protest and a flicker of awareness came into her eyes. "You thought we fought because of the separate bedrooms. Ronnie moved into the other room about a week ago; he couldn't sleep. I didn't want him to move."

Detective Gullard winced inwardly. Virginia had moved out of their bedroom before the separation. "You moved out," Gullard said. "You wanted separate bedrooms, so you could slip in and murder your husband in his sleep."

Sue gasped. "No—no!"

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"You poured gasoline over everything and threw the can behind the garage. You set fire to the house, then ran outside and pretended to be unconscious until the firemen found you."

"No!" Sue screamed. She was close to hysteria.

Gullard watched the woman as she slumped and covered her face with her hands. When he spoke, his voice was low, almost friendly. "How long have you been married, Mrs. Mannix?"

Sue struggled for control. "Five—five years," she said in a husky voice.

"Do you work? Do you have a job?"

Sue nodded. "I am a secretary at Harmon Electronics."

"Where did your husband work?"

"I—I—" Sue looked up, her eyes brimming with tears. "I don't know."

"You don't know where your husband worked?" Gullard snapped, his voice suddenly harsh again.

"Ronnie was a salesman," the woman sobbed. "He changed jobs quite often. He hasn't been himself lately; he refused to talk to me. I had the feeling he wasn't working at all." Sue sniffed and looked up. "He did work for the Biltwell Construction Company, on San Pedro Street. But I'm sure he hasn't worked there lately."

Gullard summoned the matron and sent Sue Mannix back to her cell. Then he drove his own car down to the city. He had learned Biltwell remodeled private homes. He talked to the office manager.

"Sure, Ronnie Mannix worked for us," the man said. "He was a good salesman; a little high-pressure, but he got the job done." The manager bit his lip. "At least Ronnie got the job done for a while."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Ronnie's work dropped off," the manager said. "It started a couple of months ago. He didn't follow up leads, he skipped appointments and insulted the customers."

"Did Mannix have marriage problems?"

"Not that he talked about, but the man went downhill fast. He came into the office less and less. The complaints poured in, and when I had a report that Ronnie had been seen one afternoon at the racetrack, we'd had our fill of Ronnie Mannix. I sent him his letter of dismissal and what commissions he had coming to his home. That was a week ago."

"Has he called, or come in since then?"

"No."

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"Wife trouble is what it was."

"What was that, Officer?"

"Nothing," Gullard said and walked out.

The detective drove back to the Foothill Station, and when he arrived at his desk, he found a note. He was to report to the lieutenant in charge. The lieutenant explained that young Tom Barstow had been assigned to a special detail. Could Detective Gullard handle the Mannix case alone?

"Of course," Gullard said. "I'd rather have it that way."

He was still not on duty when he returned to his desk and called the medical examiner's office.

A cheerful voice answered. "You didn't send us much to work on but we came up with a few facts. The subject was male, rather young. Cause of death, skull fracture caused by blow from sharp instrument."

"What sort of instrument?" Gullard asked.

"That hatchet you sent along fit just fine."

Gullard hung up and dialed the print lab. He was informed that the lab man had been able to lift a clear bloody print from the hatchet handle. The print was a positive make on Sue Mannix.

Gullard took out the medallion he had found in the fire. He studied it for some time, after he had cleaned it with a paper towel. Finally, he dropped it back into his pocket and looked up. The hands on the wall clock pointed to three o'clock. Detective Frank Gullard was now officially on duty.

He wrote out a full and detailed report of the case as it stood at the present time. The report would be used by the D.A.'s office to determine whether they had enough evidence to prosecute Sue Mannix.

The next morning, after Frank Gullard had eaten his usual breakfast, he returned to Lonepeak Canyon Road. The place where the Mannix home had stood was deserted, no longer a spot of local interest. Gullard drove on to the next driveway, where he parked his car by the road and walked up to the house.

He found a fat woman in the front yard, pinching out camellia buds. She informed him that she was Mrs. Sam Kellogg, and that she thought the fire had been a terrible tragedy. The woman asked about Sue Mannix.

"She's doing all right. How well did you know her?"

"Well enough to know she didn't do anything wrong."

"How well is that?"

The fat woman paused and bit her lip. "Actually I only knew her to say hello to. We had met a few times down where our lots meet.

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But she seemed like such a nice person."

"How did she and her husband get along?"

"Heavens, I don't know. I did hear them fight a few times, but come to think of it, I only heard Mr. Mannix. He was the one who was yelling."

Gullard growled and cut off his comment. He didn't mention that he knew how a woman could goad her husband into yelling at her. Instead, he brought out the medallion. "Did you ever see Mr. Mannix wear this?"

Mrs. Kellogg snorted. "Not that fancy dan, not him. Mr. Mannix wore only tailored clothes. Even on weekends he wore expensive slacks and sport shirts." The woman looked away, then turned back. "Let me see that thing again. Yes, I think I have seen one like it. That hippie who stopped by here day before yesterday was wearing one."

"Hippie?"

"You know, those long-haired people who play guitars and don't work."

"What did this hippie want?"

"He wanted to use my telephone, to call a friend to come up here and get him." Mrs. Kellogg sniffed. "I didn't let him in, so he went on. Don't ask me if he stopped at the Mannix place; I can't see the front of their place from here. But if you want to find out about him, go on up the canyon. There is a bunch of hippies up there, took over the vacant place at the end. No doubt this fellow came down from there."

Frank Gullard drove on up the canyon and pulled into the drive at the end. The house was run-down, in need of repair, and appeared deserted. He sat in the car, his fingers around the medallion. When no one appeared, Gullard turned around and drove back to the Foothill Station. He tossed the medallion into a desk drawer and never mentioned the piece in any of his reports.

Sue Mannix had been brought to trial and was convicted on the evidence gathered by Detective Frank Gullard.

Now, seven years later, Detective Frank Gullard was on his way to talk to the woman he had sent to prison.

He found the address, a modest, but fairly new home in a quiet neighborhood. He walked up and rang the door chimes.

The woman who answered the door bore little resemblance to the young Sue Mannix that Gullard remembered. The ash-blonde hair was now colorless and heavily streaked with grey. Lines creased her face and her lips were compressed into a thin line. "Detective

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Gullard," Sue said, and held the screen door open. She followed the detective into the livingroom and sat on the sofa. Gullard sank into an easy chair.

"Nice place you have here," Gullard said.

"Do you ever wonder what it is like for all those people you send to prison?"

"I don't break the law, Mrs. Mannix, so I don't have to wonder. A prison isn't supposed to be a vacation spot; it is a place of punishment."

"How neatly you wrap things up," Sue said quietly. "Would you care for a drink, or a cup of coffee?"

"I'm on duty, Mrs. Mannix. This is not a social call."

"Of course, I'm sorry." Sue leaned forward and looked directly at Detective Gullard. "You railroaded me into prison."

Gullard shifted his bulk around in the chair. "I didn't railroad anyone," he said evenly. "You were sent to prison by a court of law."

Sue nodded slowly. "Yes, by a jury who reached a decision based on the evidence you presented to the court. I don't know whether you knew I was innocent, or not, but I do know that I was handy, that it was easier to convict me than to dig out the truth."

"The prisons are full of innocent people, Mrs. Mannix." Gullard pushed himself up out of the chair. "I've wasted enough time here."

"Detective Gullard," Sue said quietly, "that burned body you found in our home on Lonepeak Canyon Road was not my husband, Ronnie Mannix."

Gullard stopped halfway across the room, turned and stared.

Sue smiled faintly. "I see you *are* surprised. I wasn't sure whether you knew, or not. That was the body of some unfortunate young man who stopped at our place one afternoon and asked to use the telephone. Ronnie happened to be home, he murdered the young man and hid the body."

"Ridiculous," Gullard said, shaking his head. "If you knew this, you would have brought it out in court."

"But I didn't know it *then*. You *assumed* it was my husband's body, and you built the whole case of murder against me on that assumption. You didn't even bother to check. I'm sure a good detective would have done that much."

"I think you have blown your top, Mrs. Mannix."

Sue continued to smile. "Ronnie had gambled and had lost a great deal of money. He borrowed from the loan sharks and tried to get even at the racetrack, but he lost that money, too. Then he lost his

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job. The loan sharks threatened him. Ronnie was frightened and desperate. When the young man came along, Ronnie hit on the plan to disappear and make it appear he had been murdered. Ronnie didn't hesitate to use me to make his murder look authentic." Sue gave a bitter laugh.

"You are crazy, Mrs. Mannix."

Sue ignored the remark. "That night, Ronnie brought me the warm milk I always drank before I went to bed, only this time he had slipped a heavy dose of sleeping powder into it. After I had passed out, he carried me out in back and put me on the ground. He cut his own finger, smeared my hand and pressed my fingerprint on the hatchet handle. Ronnie then put the body in his bed, poured gasoline over the body and woodwork and set the house afire. He escaped in a rented car he had parked up the canyon."

Gullard shook his head. "I don't know why you would cook up a story like this. It looks to me like you've had the breaks—the governor pardoned you and you received all that money. If I were you, I'd consider myself lucky." He started for the door.

Sue slipped around in front of Gullard. "We haven't finished our business yet, Detective Gullard. I see you have heard about the money. It was a great human interest story—ex-convict left large sum of money to begin new life. The wire services picked up the story and printed it all over the country. Ronnie had been back east all these years, but when he read the story he rushed out to grab his share as my husband. Ronnie figured he could pay off the loan sharks and still have enough left over to start a new life." Sue's lips compressed into a straight line. "I didn't know until last night that Ronnie Mannix was alive. He confessed everything."

"I'll check out your story," Gullard said. "If Ronnie Mannix is still around, I'll find him."

Sue walked through the door. "Follow me," she said over her shoulder and led the way down a hallway. She opened a door and stepped aside.

Detective Gullard walked into a bedroom but stopped short when he saw the body of a man on the floor. The front of his shirt was blood-stained. A small automatic lay on the bed.

Sue Mannix leaned against the doorjamb, a thin smile on her lips. "That is my husband, Detective Gullard. Ronnie Mannix."

"You killed him."

Sue nodded. "When I refused to give him any money, Ronnie threatened me. I owed him pay-

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ment for seven years of hell, so I shot him. You'll find the gun I used on the bed."

Detective Gullard wet his lips. He recited Sue's legal rights automatically. "You are under arrest, Mrs. Mannix."

Sue laughed. "On what charge?"

"For the murder of your husband."

"But you convicted me on that charge seven years ago. The constitution states that you cannot try me twice for the same offense. A person may not be put in double jeopardy."

Detective Gullard pulled at his sagging jowls. Suddenly he felt very old. "You killed a man," he said doggedly.

"I read about the dinner they are to give in your honor. The perfect police officer." Sue laughed. "Guardian of justice, ho, ho. What will they say about you after the newspapers get this story? Do you still think they will call you Mister Law and Order? You can kiss your testimonial dinner good-bye, Detective Gullard."

Gullard growled deep in his throat. Everything he had looked forward to was being snatched away by this woman, just as Virginia, his ex-wife, had snatched away everything seven years ago. He would not let that happen again. Gullard slipped his hand inside his coat. His fingers gripped the butt of his service revolver. He would take his chances, he would explain the killing someway.

Sue continued to laugh. "I called the newspapers after I talked to you on the telephone," she said. "I told them to send reporters out, that I had a big story for them."

The door chimes rang.

Sue turned. "That will be the first of the reporters. I'll bring them back to see how the watchdog of justice can solve the same crime he so cleverly solved seven years ago."

All feeling left Detective Gullard. When he was alone he slid out his revolver and pointed the muzzle at his chest. Then he slipped the gun back into the holster. *I'll still have my pension,* he thought. *They can't take that away from me.*

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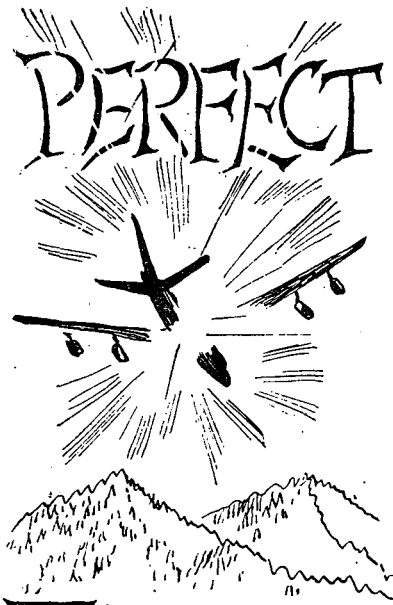
Time, according to Tennyson, is a maniac scattering dust . . .



TIMING

by Bill Pronzini

THE FIRST CALL came just before ten-thirty.

It was Saturday morning, and Carmody had just returned home to San Francisco from Fall River, Pennsylvania, over which the Trans National Airways jetliner had exploded at three o'clock Thursday afternoon. A solemn-faced representative of Trans National had rung the doorbell of the big white frame house in St. Francis Woods at six-thirty Thursday night, and given him the official word of the mishap and of Angela's death. He'd flown directly to Fall River with the representative, despite the fact that there was really nothing for him to do there.

He'd had a bad time in Fall River with Angela's brother, Russ Halpern. Halpern was one of these dim-witted high-school dropouts, a heavy construction worker, and once he had an idea implanted in his head, he never forgot it. He'd never liked Carmody, from the moment Angela had brought him around to make introductions—they had met in a posh San Francisco nightclub—and he had tried

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vainly to keep them from getting married. He thought Carmody was after Angela's substantial wealth, which was in stocks and securities inherited from her late husband, a Montgomery Street broker whose passion for handball had netted him a fatal coronary one afternoon on the courts.

Carmody had done everything humanly possible to convince Halpern that he was wrong; he'd gone out of his way to be friendly to the man, invited him for dinner several times to no avail, made special overtures of camaraderie which had been coldly rejected. Halpern was positive that Carmody intended to harm Angela physically in some way, and the perfectly natural fifty thousand dollar joint life insurance policies they had taken out three months ago had assured Halpern that he was right beyond the slightest doubt. He had even confronted Carmody with his suspicions in front of Angela, and tried to get her to leave him, but Angela had sided with her husband and told Halpern that he ought to consult a psychiatrist to rid himself of such patently absurd fixations.

That had been the end of it, or it had until news of the air explosion reached Halpern. Carmody had already left for Fall River with the airline representative by that time, but Halpern had flown there, too, and made a scene yesterday morning in front of a dozen witnesses, including two members of the Federal Aviation Administration. He'd claimed Carmody had had something to do with the plane exploding mysteriously in mid-air, so that he could get his hands on Angela's securities and the insurance. He'd claimed Carmody had talked Angela into visiting their uncle in Boston, alone, talked her onto that plane because she had never really liked to fly—and maybe put a bomb in one of her suitcases, or had it taken on the plane as part of the luggage of some fictitious passenger who had reserved the flight but had never actually gotten on.

Nobody had believed Halpern, of course; he had been ranting like a lunatic, and they'd had to restrain him from attacking Carmody. But there had been some hard questions thrown at Carmody, which the F.A.A. men had termed "merely routine," and things had been made generally uncomfortable for him. He'd stayed there last night and gotten a flight back early this morning. They had let Halpern go after he had calmed down, and Carmody learned that he'd taken a plane back from Fall River to San Francisco yesterday afternoon.

So Carmody had been home for

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less than ten minutes when the telephone rang. He was making coffee in the kitchen, and he finished spooning it into the electric percolator before going into the hallway and catching up the receiver. He said, "Hello?" and dusted coffee grounds from his hands.

At first there was only silence. Carmody frowned slightly and opened his mouth to say hello again. That was when the ticking started.

It was very faint, almost indistinct, at first, but it grew gradually louder, and Carmody recognized it almost instantly for what it was: the rhythmic, metronomic sound of a clock.

He said, "Who is this? Who's there?" but there was only the rhythm of the clock.

. . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . .

Carmody felt a chill moving along his spine, and he dropped the receiver into its cradle. He stood there looking at the telephone, moistening his lips. One of those prank—or crank—telephone calls everybody gets now and then? Carmody didn't think so, not after what had happened in Fall River yesterday with Russ Halpern. It was simply too much coincidence.

A clock ticking . . . Well, you didn't have to be a member of the intelligentsia to make the connection. Halpern had it in his head that Carmody had put a bomb on that Trans National plane, killing Angela and twenty-four other passengers in cold blood, and he figured Carmody had used an alarm-clock timing device.

What was he trying to prove with this kind of trick? Attempting to scare Carmody into an admission of guilt? No, that didn't make a great deal of sense. Putting the finger of guilt on him, as it were—telling him *he* knew that Carmody was responsible? But he'd already done that in Fall River, in front of witnesses . . .

Forget it, Carmody decided. If Halpern made any direct and overt threats, he would find himself sitting in a jail cell with a complaint for threat of bodily harm filed against him, aggrieved brother or not.

Carmody went into the kitchen to wait for his coffee to percolate.

The second call came just before noon.

Carmody was in the den, going through his and Angela's effects and drinking his third cup of coffee. A brief chill touched his shoulders at the sound of the bell; then he shrugged and went into the hallway, his shoes echoing hollowly on the polished hardwood floor.

"Hello?"

. . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . .

The sound of the clock was loud-

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er than it had been before, immediately recognizable. The muscles in Carmody's neck tightened, and his lips pulled into a thin line. He listened to the ticking for a moment, trying to make out the sound of breathing, but there was nothing. He said, "All right, Halpern, I know it's you. What do you think you're going to accomplish with this kind of thing? Halpern?"

. . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . .

"I won't be intimidated, Halpern," Carmody said. "Grief is one thing, and I can understand that. I'm grieving, too, in my own way, but don't tax my limits. I'm giving you fair warning."

. . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . .

Carmody hung up.

The third call came just before one-thirty.

Carmody had gone into the garage and gotten several cardboard boxes and had begun to pack away some of Angela's effects from their bedroom—her clothes, makeup, toilet articles, a collection of confession magazines. He was taking some sweaters from the closet when the telephone jangled from the hallway.

Startled, he dropped the sweaters and stumbled out of the closet. Mumbling under his breath, he could feel his heart plunging in his chest. The phone kept on ringing, and the bell seemed unnaturally loud in the stillness of the big house. Carmody stalked out into the hallway, picked up the receiver and put it to his ear.

. . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . .

"Now that's enough, Halpern," he said in a cold, deliberate voice. "That's all I'm going to stand for. One more call, just one more, and I'll report you to the police. I'll

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have you arrested, Halpern, Angela's brother or not. This is a trying enough time for me without having to put up with your psychosis. Have a little respect for your sister's memory, or I'll do what I said I would. I'm not kidding!"

. . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . .

"You're a fool, Halpern!" Carmody said, and slammed the receiver down.

He looked at his hand and saw that it was trembling slightly. He shouldn't let this kind of foolishness upset him the way it was, but there was something unnerving, almost . . . frightening about that damned ticking. It got to you after a while, there was no denying it. Well, Halpern had better heed that warning; Carmody would report him if there was one more call, all right. He had his peace of mind to think about.

In the bedroom again, he picked up the sweaters he had dropped and packed them into one of the cardboard boxes.

The fourth call came just before three.

The shrill discordancy of the bell brought Carmody out of the leather recliner in a single convulsive jump. He had been relaxing as best he could, now that the packing was finished, and he had almost dozed off in the cool silence of the livingroom. Perspiration gathered on his forehead as he listened to the telephone ringing.

Carmody thought about letting it ring, but that was no good, and he knew it instinctively. Halpern would keep the line open, keep it ringing until Carmody answered; ringing, ringing . . .

Striding into the hallway, he shut off the incessant bell by snapping up the receiver.

. . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . .

Louder now, it seemed; even louder than it had been the last time. Moisture sheened Carmody's face and neck. *Wait him out, don't say anything; make him commit himself, play his game, wait him out* . . .

. . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . .

. . . wait . . . wait . . . wait . . .

. . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . .

It got to Carmody finally; he couldn't take any more. His lips pulled back from his teeth, and he screamed into the phone, "Damn you, Halpern, I've had enough, do you hear me? I'm going to hang up, and then I'm going to come over to that apartment of yours and have it out with you face to face. I won't stand for this kind of thing, Halpern. I won't stand for it!"

. . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . .

"Answer me, Halpern! Damn you, answer me!"

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. . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . .

Carmody stood there, panting. *Get control of yourself,* he thought. *This is what he wants you to do, blow your cool. Easy now, just take it easy.* He lifted one hand and wiped away some of the beaded droplets of sweat. As he did so, his eyes fell on the unerringly accurate antique clock which was on the hallway wall. One minute to three. *Was that all?* It seemed like an eternity since that first call, but it had only been four and a half hours ago, ten-thirty . . . .

Suddenly Carmody's hand clutched the telephone receiver until the tendons in his wrist seemed as if they would burst through the skin. His eyes grew wide, and his brain whirled furiously.

Four and a half hours . . . Ten-thirty till three . . . Angela had boarded the Trans National plane at ten-thirty on Thursday morning, and he had set the alarm-clock timer on the bomb, which he had carefully packed in two heavy beach towels inside her leather traveling bag, for exactly three o'clock . . . Four and a half hours, ten-thirty till three, and Halpern had come home last night and this house had been deserted and all the locks were flimsy and there were a thousand undetectable hiding places in an old house like this . . . And Halpern was a heavy construction worker who helped to build roads through mountains, through walls of rock, and as such he had access to—

"No!" Carmody screamed with full and irrefutable understanding. "No, Halpern, no, no!"

. . . *tick* . . . *tick* . . . *ti*—

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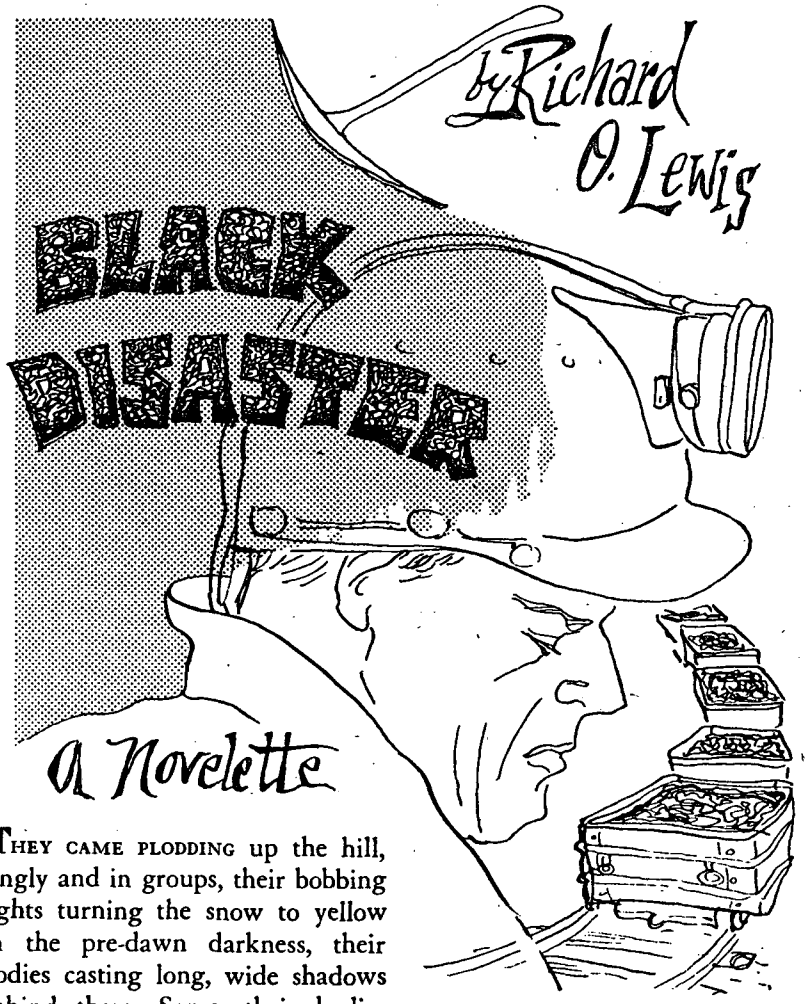
Up! mind thine own aim and
God speed the mark!
—Emerson



THEY CAME PLODDING up the hill, singly and in groups, their bobbing lights turning the snow to yellow in the pre-dawn darkness, their bodies casting long, wide shadows behind them. Some, their bodies

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black blobs against the snow, had not bothered to light their lights, for they were creatures of darkness and needed little light to guide them.

As usual, Mike Kovchec was among the first to arrive at the steamy mouth of the slope that led down at a steep angle into the maw of the black pit. Other early arrivals were loading themselves into a string of small cars that, at a signal to the engineer, would whisk them down to the bottom in a matter of seconds. They were talking and laughing, making ribald jokes.

Mike did not join them. Alone, he began picking his way down the slag-strewn slope, the carbide light at the front of his cap casting a yellow nimbus ahead of him and glinting occasionally from the twin pairs of narrow-gauge tracks along which cars would soon be shuttling up and down between the bottom of the mine and the top of the tall tipple.

He was a short, heavy man, somewhat shy and slow to make acquaintances. Although his hair was black, his face was a contrasting white, for his face never felt the rays of the sun through the long wintry months unless the sun chose to shine down through the smoke-filled sky on Sundays—which it seldom did. He was not unfriendly; it was just that he sometimes found difficulty in expressing himself and in understanding the rough talk and crude jokes of the others.

He did not miss companionship. He liked being alone with his thoughts, even as now, for his thoughts were generally pleasing to him. There was a tuneless whistle upon his lips as he trudged along, the blackness ahead of him retreating steadily before his light. Andy, his son, would be proud of him, just wait and see! Andy should go to high school next year, become educated! In this great new world anything was possible! Andy would wear a white collar, never work in the mines! Not that mining was not an honest job, but there were dangers . . .

Mike leaped quickly away from the rails to flatten himself against the ribbing of rough boards that held back the earthen sides of the tunnel as a distant rumbling reached his ears. The rumbling became a sudden roar as a string of cars came hurtling down, the men in them crouched low to keep their heads clear of the flashing roof beams, their lights flickering and guttering in the rush of air. Mike heard words shouted at him as cars clattered by, but the noise of iron wheels upon iron rails and the swish of air made them nearly

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unintelligible. He caught but one of them: "Squarehead!"

That would be Joe Spore or son. Neither missed a chance to ridicule him in some way before the other miners. He hoped he would not have trouble with them again today. They were greedy and quarrelsome, and could easily become dangerous.

Stepping away from the ribbing, Mike continued down the slope, careful to avoid the tail rope of jagged, frayed steel that lashed and writhed between the rails in the wake of the descending car. A single lash from that thin serpent could shatter an ankle beyond repair; and he must avoid injury at all cost, must not be laid off from work, not now. Schooling would take money—books, new clothing, things like that—and he must stand proud in Andy's eyes . . .

The string of cars, now empty, came roaring up. Seconds later, a loaded string went thundering and clattering down the other pair of tracks.

The sloping tunnel widened suddenly to become the flat, cavern-like bottom of the mine. Twin rails branched out in various directions among the black, oaken props that held the slate roof in place, each pair of rails finally becoming lost in the shadowy mouth of an entry.

Here, the full scent of the mine greeted Mike's nostrils—minute particles of coal dust in suspension, damp mustiness of mildewed props, ripe with decay, a miasma of smashed forests that had flourished live and green eons before the memory of man. It was a heady odor, an opiate. Some claimed that once the scent of the mine had clutched a man's senses, it held him prisoner to the black tunnels for the rest of his working days.

Chin thrust forward, head bent low to avoid the low roof, hands clasped behind him in typical coal-miner's crouch, Mike followed one of the tracks into the wide mouth of the mule barn that had been cut into the side of one entry. Here, the scent of the mine was compounded by the odor of mule droppings and of moldy corn and hay; pungent, but not offensive.

Mike entered the second stall and let a hand run lightly over the neck of the small, black mule there. "Hi, Molly," he said, rubbing the hollows behind ears that had been worn to stubs by their continual contact with low roofs. Molly turned her head toward him in greeting, then quickly turned away again. Her eyes had not seen the light of day since the end of summer in some nearly forgotten pasture, and the glow from Mike's light tended to be blinding.

Mike unsnapped her halter rope

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and led her from the stall. "Steady, girl," he said, and Molly stood obediently, head bowed, while he took the padded collar from its peg, strapped it about her neck, and crossed the leather tugs over her back to keep them from dragging through the muck.

"We go to work, Molly," he said, picking up the hickory butt-stick with its tail chain and hook.

Molly needed no further instruction. She followed the pair of rails out of the barn, placing her feet daintily in the worn hollows between the ties, and stopped at the parting where the pit boss waited amid strings of empties.

One of the chores of the pit boss was to make certain that every miner got his just share of cars to load each day, no more, no less, no partiality shown. He held up six fingers in front of his light.

Mike nodded, went to the sixth car in one of the strings, and pulled its end coupling. Then he took the tugs from Molly's back, snapped them to each end of the butt-stick, and dropped the hook into the coupling slot of the lead car.

"Hi-yup!" he commanded, placing his right foot upon the narrow bumper of the car and hooking his elbow over the splintery boards of its front. Then, as Molly strained forward to bring the tail chain taut, he slid his left foot out along it for support, crouched low between mule and car, placed the palm of his left hand against Molly's silky rump, and ordered, "Gee!"

Molly swung sharply to the right, clattered the cars across open switches, and set her course between a pair of rails that led into the narrow blackness of an entry.

Old Davy waited at the mouth of the first room, his face indistinct and shadowy beneath the shielding glare of the light upon his cap. Probably the oldest worker in the mine, he had been born into it and had never known another way of life.

He pulled the coupling pin of the end car, and Mike helped him slue it across the switch and into the room that was a shambles of fallen props over a flood of coal that had been blasted out by the shots of the night before.

Old Davy set to work immediately with his heavy scoop shovel. Ten scoops, a bushel, three cents; twenty-five bushels, a ton, seventy-five cents; four tons a day, three dollars—more than twice as much money as he had been making just ten years ago! When the car was filled, he would top it off with chunks piled as high as the low roof would permit.

Mike did not tarry; there was work to be done, miners waiting.

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"Car!" he shouted at the next room.

Hank Staley's light bobbed out of the black depths. He was a tall man, and big. Never throughout the working day could he ever stand erect. He hurried from the room, crouched, careful of the low-hanging crossbeams. "I get 'im," he said, turning toward the end of the string.

"Hi-*yup*!" shouted Mike when he heard the return clink of the coupling bolt.

Here the entry began a sharp incline to a higher level where ancient, subterranean forces had shifted the rocky crust of the earth upward a full five feet. The muscles of Molly's rump rippled and corded beneath Mike's hand as she leaned heavier into her collar to trundle the remaining four cars slowly up the hill.

Two lights awaited him at the black mouth of the next room, shadowy figures behind them; Joe Spore and son.

"Car," said Mike, bringing Molly to a halt.

"We want two cars now," said Joe. He started back toward the end of the string.

Mike stepped from behind Molly and went back along the cars after him. "You take your turn like everybody else," he said.

"We are two," said Joe. "We take two cars!" He shook a fist.

"You are one," said Mike. "One man and helper. I tell you that before!"

"My son is a young man now!" Joe insisted. "Very strong!"

"He is still a boy! He should get good education!"

"I educate him to work like a man!" said Joe. "Like my father educated me!" He leaned over to uncouple the two end cars.

Mike shoved him roughly away, uncoupled the last car, and nudged it away from the others. "You get one-car turn!" he said, straightening up. "You want more, you go ask pit boss!"

He pulled himself angrily along the cars to the head of the string and mounted the bumper. Molly leaned into her collar, brought the tail chain taut, and set the cars into motion.

"We get more, you wait and see!" Joe was shouting after him. "Or you better look out! You may not work long!"

Since the Spores had come to work in the mine two weeks ago, they had given nothing but trouble—always wanting more than their share, ignoring the rights of others, hurling threats. The boy wasn't so bad, but he was a complete slave to his father's will, forced to follow in his father's footsteps.

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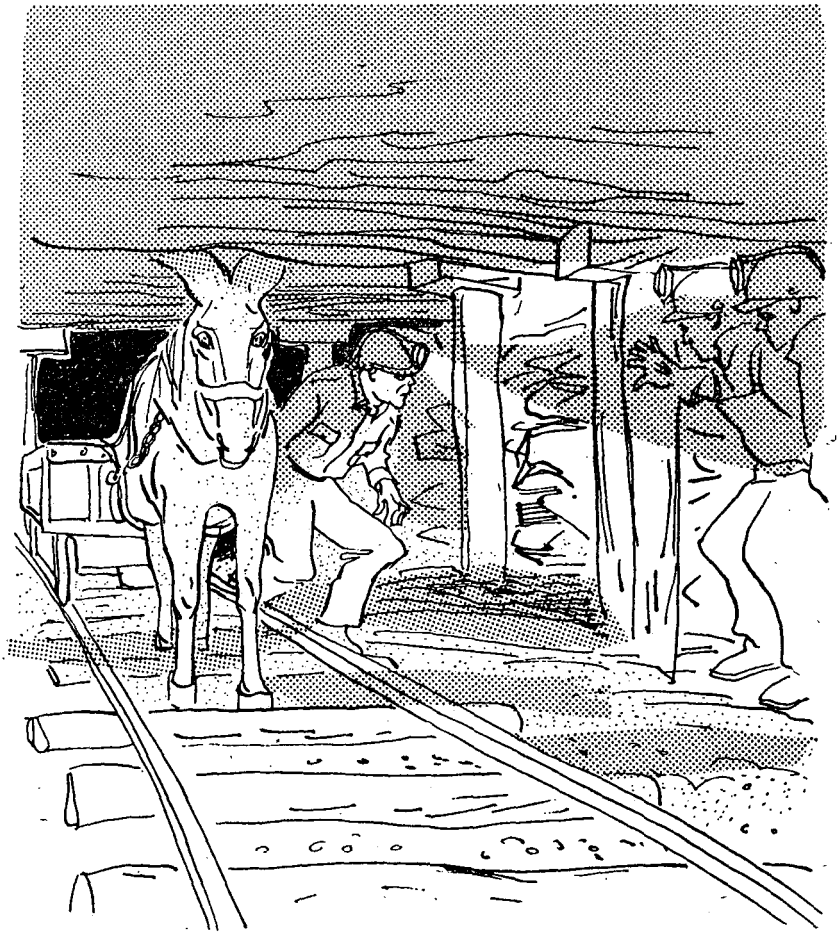

When Mike stopped at the next room, he discovered he had only two cars left. That meant that one of the Spores had jerked a coupling pin on an extra car just as he had pulled away. "Damn!"

He delivered the final car and began retracing his steps back toward the parting, carrying the butt-stick under one arm to keep it from clattering and banging over the ties at Molly's heels.

As he passed the Spores' room, he saw by their lights that they had

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the extra car. Well, there was nothing he could do about it now. He wouldn't fight with them; he would just skip them on the next turn.

"Andy," he said, as if his son were present, "you will not work in the mines. Your father will make it all by himself."

At Hank's room, he picked up a loaded car left over from the day before and rode it the short distance back to the bottom.

Mike held up six fingers to the pit boss, and the pit boss nodded reluctantly. All in all, there were only eleven men working in the entry, and Mike was making a twelve-car turn. He would have to compensate on the next turn. A week ago, he had made the mistake of giving the Spores an extra car and had got reprimanded for it. He must not let it happen again. The spring layoff would come all too soon. Then there would be slack times, two or three months without work. He must stay out of trouble, not risk his job . . .

Mike delivered the last two cars of his second string to the two men who were working at the extreme end of the entry, forging the tunnel deeper and deeper into the black seam of coal so that more rooms could be opened in their wake.

They were lean men, work-hardened and tough, and their chores were many. They took up bottom or broke down roof where necessary to afford head room for mule and driver. They erected permanent beams across the roof, shored the ribs where shoring was necessary, laid new ties along the extension of corridor, spiked rails to them and, in separate cars, loaded out the shale, slate, sulphur balls, dirt, and other debris of their advancement, for there was no room for gob piles along their narrow tunnel. Naked to the waist, they toiled, breathing deeply, bodies wet and black, for no matter how much fresh air the giant fans sent down the air shaft into the mine, the air at the dead end of an entry was always hot, stale, and dust-laden. They got paid by tonnage of coal, plus footage of progress.

Mike picked up four loads on the way back to the parting, delivered them, and dropped the tail chain hook into a string of five empties fresh from the top. They were wet and snow-laden, which meant that another wintry storm had gripped the world above.

He dropped a car each for Old Davy and Hank, and whispered encouragement to Molly as she toiled up the grade. Two lights bobbed at the entrance of the Spores' room. They had heard him coming and were waiting for him.

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"We want car!" shouted Joe Spore as the string went by without slowing.

"You got two cars!" shouted Mike. "Now you skip a turn!"

The younger Spore lunged suddenly ahead, clutched Molly's halter, and jerked her to a stop. The slackened tail chain hit the ties, and Mike quickly thrust a shoulder into Molly's rump, his body braced to absorb the momentum of the cars so they would not crash over her heels. To a mine mule, a broken leg meant sudden and ultimate dispatch with a sledgehammer.

"Let go that mule!" he warned.

Joe was already heading back toward the end of the string. Mike leaped after him, clutched him by the shoulder as he stooped to pull a coupling pin, and spun him away. "You do not get car!" he shouted.

"We need car!" said Joe, backing away. "We need money!"

"You take turn!" said Mike, starting toward the head of the string.

He heard the swift shuffle of footsteps behind him and wheeled about just in time to see the swinging scoop shovel in Joe's hands. It was coming directly toward his head. He reached out with both hands, caught the handle of the scoop near its iron blade, and went stumbling back against the cars. Then he twisted his arms and shoved. Joe went spinning back against the rib of the entry and fell heavily to a sitting position, the scoop clattering from his hands. "I get you!" he shouted, struggling to get his feet under him. "I get you! You squarehead!"

"I do not fight with you," said Mike, standing over him, "unless I have to. *But you do not get extra car*!" He picked up the shovel and flung it angrily away into the darkness.

"I get you, squarehead! You wait and see!"

Mike stepped back a pace. "Hi-yup, Molly!" he called, and as the mule obediently began trundling the cars forward, he hooked a ride on the rear bumper of the last car as it clattered by.

After delivering the remaining empties, he continued on to the face of the entry. The men had a car loaded and waiting, piled high with jagged pieces of shale that extended out over sides and ends. "Bring a load of props next trip," called one of them as Mike hooked the car and mounted a bumper. Mike bobbed his light in acknowledgment as he went trundling away, sharp shale stabbing at his back from the laden car.

He picked up two more loads along the way, and another load was waiting for him at the mouth of the Spores' room. He shunted it

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out onto the main track and added it to the string. The lights of father and son were huddled together at the far end of the room. Neither had bothered to come forward to help with the car.

At the top of the downward slope, he placed a protecting hand against Molly's rump and stiffened his arm as the string began its descent. "Easy, Molly," he said, feeling the pressure of the cars build up behind him. "Easy, girl."

Halfway down the slope, Molly's mincing steps became a gingery dance as she gradually increased her pace, picking her way rapidly over the ties and into the flickering shadows ahead as the hand pressed harder and harder against her. Outrun the cars, but not too fast. Hold back at the same time.

Approaching the foot of the slope, the cars reached maximum speed, jolting and bouncing, tail chain swaying. It was then that Molly, without warning, leaped suddenly to the left and away from the rails. Mike, finding Molly's rump no longer against his hand and the chain whipped away from beneath his foot, went sprawling forward. He saw the long slab of slate across the track just a split second before he fell heavily over it on hands and knees, the cars roaring and pounding behind him.

Taking advantage of his own momentum, Mike rolled quickly away from between the rails just as the lead car smashed into the rock barrier and leaped halfway across it. Molly squealed once in pain and fright, and a slab of shale shot from the top of the stalled car to shatter itself on the rail at Mike's head.

He scrambled to a sitting position, clutched his right knee in both hands, and slowly tried to straighten out the leg.

A light appeared at Hank's room, just a few yards away. Then Hank came running up, crouched low, arms swinging before him. "You all right?"

Mike nodded. "Look to the mule," he said. Then he rolled up his trouser leg and inspected his knee in the glow of the light that lay at his side. The kneecap was red, dented, and filled with pain, but there were no deep lacerations. He picked up his cap and light and got slowly to his feet, placing most of his weight on his left leg.

Hank came forward, leading Molly. "A bad cut and a bruise or two," he said. "But nothing broken."

"Good," said Mike. He hobbled over to Molly and inspected the ragged cut where a flying piece of shale had struck her just above the hock. Then he looked at the slab of slate beneath the car and up at the

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low roof above. There was no fresh break in the roof. The slab could have got across the rails only if two people had carried it and placed it there.

Hank, too, had taken in the situation. "Them devils up there tried to get you," he said, sweeping his light toward the top of the grade.

Mike nodded. "They mad because they don't get extra car."

"Joe spends too much time in saloon," said Hank. "Always in debt. Bad example for the boy."

Mike hobbled around the derailed cars and up the incline toward the Spores' room. Lights vanished from the mouth of the room as he approached. Obviously, the two had been standing just inside the room, watching and listening. The two lights turned toward him as he entered.

"You did that!" accused Mike. "You could have crippled me, caused me to lose work. You might have killed mule."

"Clumsy squarehead," taunted Joe. "You should watch maybe where you are going."

"I tell you once more," Mike said, evenly, "and for very last time. While I drive mule in this entry, *you get no extras*!"

"We poor people," Joe said, stubbornly. "We need extras."

"You not get them."

Mike turned to retrace his steps from the room and keep the peace.

"Then maybe we get new mule driver for sure!" Joe shouted after him. "New mule driver tomorrow, maybe."

A report, of course, could be made to the pit boss, but Mike didn't want to do anything that might hint that he was incapable of handling his own job. Anyway, Andy would not want his father to run for help. Andy would be proud of a father who fought his own battles.

Hank, with the help of Old Davy, had the track cleared and two of the cars back on the rails by the time Mike returned. Together, they slued the other two cars into position and coupled them.

"You be careful," warned Hank. "They'll keep after you, try to break you one way or another."

Mike nodded and placed his arm over Molly's neck. "We both got bad legs," he said soothingly, "but we got to get work done." He hobbled along beside her as she set the cars into motion.

"You hurt?" the pit boss wanted to know as Mike came limping toward the parting.

Mike shook his head. "Just shook up a bit. Fall of slate."

The pit boss nodded his understanding. In spite of many safety measures, slate falls were not at all uncommon.

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A mule driver brought in loads from another entry and hooked on to a string of empties. He scooped up a double handful of snow from one of the cars, squeezed it into a ball, and tossed it away into the darkness beyond his mule. "If this keeps up till quittin' time," he announced, "we'll be wadin' home through drifts hip deep!"

Mike was extra careful during the rest of the day. He still rode the tail chain, but each time he came to the brow of the hill he dismounted, shot a wooden sprag into one of the rear wheels of the end car, and then led Molly down the grade, his light piercing the shadows ahead, the spragged wheel squealing and grinding on the iron rail.

The Spores accepted their rightful turn in silence and gave him no further trouble.

Later, Mike seated himself on a battered powder keg just outside the mule barn, unhooked his light and placed it on the floor so that its glow shone away from his eyes, and took a sandwich from his lunch pail. All the miners had gone now. Some would be stopping at the saloon to wash the coal dust from their throats or to get a growler for home consumption. Others would already be seeking the tin tub of hot water by the kitchen stove where they could wash the black grime from their white bodies so far as possible.

There came an occasional grunt or sigh from the mules as they munched their corn, the squeal of an angry rat, and the intermittent drip-drip of water seeping down from various faults in the roof. Otherwise, the silence was as complete as the great darkness that pushed in around the little island of light.

To Mike, it was the best part of the day. Here he could ease his back against the rough planking, feel his muscles relax from their crouched position, and be alone with his own thoughts for a few restful moments before taking up his final task, the task of shot-firing.

The mine was a new one and nad, as yet, but four working entries and less than fifty rooms, but it was expanding rapidly as new entries were being driven and old ones extended. By next year there would be more than a hundred rooms.

As he ate his sandwich, washing it down with leftover coffee from the bottom compartment of his lunch pail, Mike's thoughts, as usual, turned to Andy. Andy could be proud of a father that was both a mule driver and shot-fireman, a father strong enough to work at two jobs.

The miners, too, viewed the

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shot-firer with due respect. His was a dangerous job, and without him there would be no coal to load out the following morning, for rules of safety forbade all miners from touching off shots of their own during working hours. A windy shot—one that blew the tamping of coal dust from the drilled hole instead of exploding behind the coal itself—could easily ignite the resultant cloud of dust as if it were gunpowder. Once ignited, the cloud would hungrily suck in a dust-laden draft, expand, and go roaring down the entry and into the other entries, feeding itself as it went, charring and destroying everything in its path, and leaving an oxygenless void in its wake. Such explosions were few, yet the possibility was always present.

Mike tossed the crusty part of his sandwich to one side and took a final gulp of coffee from the pail. Well, the sooner he got at the job ahead, the quicker he would get home to Maria, a hot bath, supper and, finally, bed.

He picked up the light and unscrewed its bottom section. In the resulting total darkness, he shook out the spent carbide, poured in fresh granules, spat upon them, heard them hiss, and quickly screwed the bottom back into place. He cupped his palm over the reflector an instant to accumulate gas, roweled the automatic lighter with the heel of his hand, and popped the light into a six-inch lance of flame.

His injured knee paining him at each step, he picked his way across the switch rails at the parting, and headed toward the entry in which he and Molly had toiled during the day. The last cars to be brought down from above showed fresh accumulations of snow, which meant that the storm had not abated with the approach of night.

As usual, Old Davy's room was neat and trim, props well-set and tightly capped, fresh rails extended, and refuse and dirt loaded out. Mike swept the 30-foot face of the room with his light and saw at a glance the three pieces of torn newspaper dangling there, each piece marking the location of a shot so that the shot-firer would not have to waste precious moments searching for dark fuses hanging from their black background or, worse still, fail to find one and leave a shot unfired.

Light in hand, Mike picked up the first of the three fuses, speared flame into its split end, and saw it sputter into immediate life. The second fuse gave him a bit of trouble, and he had to peel the split ends farther back to expose more of the powder within before it responded to the touch of the flame.

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He had no fear of the first shot going off before he finished the work at hand, for the diggers always left enough fuse footage to insure the firer two or three minutes of safety—just in case he needed it. Seconds later, the third fuse lit, he limped from the room and into the entry.

Four shots showed in Hank's room, and Mike touched them off in rapid succession.

Halfway up the grade where the slab of slate across the rails had tumbled him earlier that day, Mike felt new pains begin to stab at his knee, and he was forced to slow his pace. By the time he reached the top of the little hill, he heard the sudden *whoomph* of one of the shots in Old Davy's room. Then, seconds later, *whoomph-whoomph* as the other two went off almost simultaneously. From now on, those jarring, muffled sounds would follow him through the darkness from entry to entry until his task was completed.

The Spores' room was cluttered, as usual. Props reached from floor to roof in crazy, unstable angles, and the floor was littered with the dust and debris of the day's work. There was a haphazard gob pile beside one pillar, and from it protruded the neck of a pint flask. Either Joe had been bringing whiskey to the mine with him or he had simply used the bottle to carry water for his carbide light.

Mike limped over the strewn floor to the first of four shot-markers. The fuse that dangled from the black face was scarcely more than a foot in length, and the split in its end was much longer than necessary. Mike shook his head. Probably an eight-foot hole with four feet of blasting powder! Trying to move as much coal as possible with a single shot! Or trying to save a penny on fuse!

A touch of the light brought the fuse into instant life, and Mike took three crouching steps to the right to pick up the second fuse. It was properly split, but it failed to respond to the pencil of hot flame. The powder seemed moist, as if the fuse had been handled carelessly with sweaty fingers. Mike rolled the split ends farther back and tried again. Then he held the tongue of flame steadily in the split, burning and searing, until the powder finally began to sputter and hiss in an acceptable manner.

The end of the third fuse was blunt, unsplit. Mike fished from his pocket the sharp knife he always carried for such emergencies, opened it, and began to make the cut. The fuse was wet. He lopped off four inches of it and began to make a second cut.

It was then that alarming

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thoughts began to hammer suddenly at his brain. What if one of the Spores had deliberately set a shot fuse in that first hole, a fuse that reached back into the face only a foot or so instead of the customary three or four feet? Instead of the usual slow-acting powder that pushed the coal out in desirable chunks, what if there was rock-shattering dynamite in that hole that would send the coal flying in death-dealing splinters and shards?

Even as the thoughts went through his head, he was scrambling away from the face, trying to get to his feet. It was best not to take chances. He could stop and fire the remaining two shots on his return trip down the entry . . .

Mike felt, rather than heard, the sudden blast that rocked the room. A giant concussion of air staggered him, something slammed into the side of his head with stunning force, and he felt himself falling backwards—down, down, as if into some deep, black pit that was filled with flying props and crashing slate.

Half-stunned, he tried to roll out of the pit, tried to push himself up, but something was wrong. Something was holding him down. The air was heavily laden with coal dust and the acrid odor of spent dynamite, and there was a feeble glow of light that formed a pale nimbus about him. He turned his head toward the source of the glow and saw his light laying on its side a few inches from his hand, the flame at the end of its tube reduced to a mere button of yellow. He reached out for it and felt a sudden pain stab through his left leg. Stark realization swept over him. He was pinned down, and the fuse of the second shot was burning its way into the face of coal.

He clutched up his light, clicked the water valve a notch or two farther open, shook the button of yellow into a white flame, and made a quick survey of his surroundings.

His left leg lay in a jagged pile of coal and rubble, across it was a fallen prop, and pressing down hard on the prop was a thick slab of slate. Another slab hung precariously down from the roof directly above him.

Mike didn't know if the blast had knocked him unconscious or not. His head pained. He couldn't remember, couldn't think straight. Even now, the fuse of that second shot could be sputtering just inches—seconds—from its explosive charge, a charge that could cut him to ribbons, engulf him in rubble, and bring more slate crashing down.

He placed his foot against the prop and pushed. The prop rocked

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back and forth, bringing stabbing jolts of pain to the leg beneath. Crouching his body closer, he placed his foot against the slate and gave a mighty shove that was strengthened by panic. The round prop acted as a roller, and the slab of slate went slithering away.

Freeing his leg quickly, he spun about to hands and knees and began scrambling over the debris away from the face. The second explosion hurled him from the mouth of the room and sent him sprawling across the rails in the entry. The light flipped away from his fingers, went out, and a silent wave of total blackness swept over him.

Mike lay for a time where he had fallen, breathing heavily, wondering if he dared try to move. He finally rolled slowly to a sitting position and began patting the floor on either side, his fingers searching for the light, but even as he searched, he knew that the chance of finding it among the rubble was remote.

He slowly drew up his left leg and began exploring it with his fingers. His trousers and underwear were torn, wet, and slippery, and there was a long, jagged gash in the calf of his leg. He couldn't tell how bad the wound was, but his fingers told him that it was deep and bleeding. Bad enough!

Alone in the darkness, he felt beaten and depressed. Now he would lose work, lose money—something no miner could afford in the wintertime—and all because of the stupidity and greed of one man. Had Joe really tried to kill him? Or was he merely trying to make things so dangerous for him that he would finally knuckle under? Either way, Joe had accomplished one thing: he would have a different mule driver in the morning, maybe one that would be afraid of him.

Mike had no fear of any further physical danger. Even without a light, there was no chance of becoming lost. He could easily follow the rails back to the parting and to the slope that would lead him up into the world above.

But, no, he must not do that! Andy would not respect a father who ran away from the job before him. He must find the light, fire the rest of the shots. Otherwise, the miners would come to work in the morning and find no coal. A wasted day!

He began searching for the light again, crawling from side to side, exploring each jagged piece of coal with his fingers. Head throbbing and leg filled with pain, he finally rolled over to his stomach for a moment of rest. It was then that his nose picked up the tangy, un-

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mistakable odor of gas escaping from the unlit tube of the carbide light. Somewhere directly ahead! Hands groping, he inched forward until his eager fingers finally clutched the object of their search. He swung to a sitting position, heeled the wheel of the flint lighter, and saw the white flame shatter the darkness about him.

His first thought was his wounded leg. He held the light close to it and peeled back the bloody and torn trousers and underwear. The wound was long, deep, jagged, and dirty, and blood was still oozing from it. He sat looking at it, wondering what he should do. There was a water hydrant back at the parting, back by the mule barn. He could go there and wash the wound; but if he went back now, he would merely have to retrace his steps to fire the remaining shots in the entry. Best to fire the shots first, then fix the leg before going on into the next entry.

He pulled himself up along the rough wall of the tunnel to a standing position and stood for a moment with eyes closed, waiting for the dizziness to leave his head and for a sense of balance to return. Finally, he tested his leg with the weight of his body. Excruciating pain stabbed him, but the leg held firm. He began hobbling forward along the littered rails. "Maybe we make 'im now, Andy," he whispered.

When he finally emerged from the entry and reached the mule barn, exhaustion had laid hold of him. He staggered to the hydrant and sat down on the wooden watering trough to rest. The muttering of the mules and their warm smell soothed him, and a darkness blacker than the pit itself began to creep over him. He felt himself drifting comfortably away into some sweet oblivion, an oblivion where there was no more work to be done, no pain, no waiting drifts of snow to flounder through. He struggled against the feeling and finally succeeded in shaking the sticky shadows from his brain. Then he bared his wound and extended his leg across the trough beneath the mouth of the hydrant. The water was cold and numbing, but it sent a refreshing tingle through his body that partially revived him from impending lethargy.

The wound was caked with dried blood mingled with coal dust, and new blood was seeping from it. He washed it as best he could, trying to think what he could use as a bandage, but there was no material available except feed sacks, burlap, and his own rough and dirty clothing. He

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would wait, think of something later on. There was work to be done, shots still to be fired in the rooms along the other entries . . .

It seemed hours before he finally succeeded in dragging himself back to the parting, his task completed. He sat down on a powder keg to rest, and exhaustion swept over him again in a great, smothering wave. He wanted nothing more than to lie down on the inviting floor and let deep, warm shadows engulf him. The miners would find him there in the morning, see to it that he got safely home . . .

He didn't know if he had drifted away into a half-sleep or not, but he found himself suddenly wide awake. Maria! She would be wondering about him, worrying. He was already late, later than he had ever been before. She would feel certain that some terrible tragedy had befallen him in the mine, or that he had got lost in the storm. She might awaken the neighbors, organize a search party. Or, worse still, she might come alone in search for him, come trudging through the storm.

He couldn't let either of those things happen. He would have to get home under his own power, somehow. He couldn't afford to be found helpless, unable to do his work. He would have to get home, get his leg looked after, get some sleep, and get back on the job in the morning. To be off work because of illness might even cost him his job!

He began coughing, and the scene about him began to grow dimmer. Were the dust clouds from the exploded shots catching up with him, or was something happening to his eyes? Whatever it was, he realized now that if he expected to get home, he would have to start while he still had strength enough left.

He cast his light toward the mouth of the slope. The incline seemed steeper than before, insurmountable, and even if he did succeed in staggering to the top, there were the drifts of snow to be taken into consideration.

Yet he had to try. There was little else he could do. Andy would expect his father to make an effort, not lie down and shift responsibility to others.

He needed a crutch, something to lean on. He swept his light over the spidery rails of the entry. There was nothing there except a few piles of cumbersome props. Perhaps in the mule barn . . .

Thoughts of the mule barn brought a new idea creeping into his brain. The idea was hazy and rather mixed up, but the more he pondered it, the more promise it held.

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Minutes later, he came stumbling from the barn, leading Molly by her halter. "Whoa-up, girl," he said. "Steady." Then he brought the powder keg to her side, mounted it, and forced his injured leg over her shaggy back. She tossed her head around to look inquiringly at him. This was something new to her, something quite beyond the normal call of duty.

The light dangling from his left hand, he circled her neck with his other arm and rested his cheek comfortably against her. He lay there a moment, waiting for the giddiness to clear from his head.

"Hi-yup!" he commanded, presently.

Molly swung to the right, toward the entry in which she was accustomed to toil.

"Haw!" shouted Mike. "Haw! Hi-yup!"

Molly straightened her course to the left, entered the mouth of the slope, and began carefully picking her way up and over the unfamiliar pattern of ties that clutched at her feet.

Mike lay low upon her, keeping his head down and his body flat to avoid the rough beams of the roof.

The moist warmth of the mine slid slowly back and away, and crisper, colder air took its place. Then the air became cold, and the timbers and beams of the slope showed white and ghostly where the moisture from the mine had turned to hoarfrost upon them.

Mike, his head dangling against the side of Molly's neck, sensed rather than felt that she had ceased her forward motion. He cast the rays of his light ahead. A drift of white lay across their path, and more snow was whirling and eddying. Molly laid her stubby ears back and made a whimpering sound through her nose, and Mike felt the quick shudder that rippled through her body as she studied the unfamilar world of white that lay before her.

"It will be all right, Molly," he promised her. "You will sleep with neighbor's cow in warm barn tonight. Hi-yup!"

Molly stepped obediently forward into the drift, head lowered, ears flattened, shod hooves seeking purchase in the alien substance that sought to mire her legs. She went gingerly ahead, step after step, eyes blinking against the white flakes that gyrated blindingly about her head.

Mike could see nothing now save the snow-filled nimbus of yellow that pressed in about him. He rose higher on Molly's back, swept his light about and finally hooked it into the shield of his cap—where the wind promptly guttered it and blew it out. Then there was only

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the whiteness of the drifts beneath, the blackness above, and the rush and whip of flakes upon his face.

Directly to his right and down in the little valley lay the hidden houses of the camp. All he had to do was to turn in that direction and keep going downhill until he could find their black hulks.

"Gee, Molly!" he commanded. "Gee, girl!" And then, as Molly turned sharply to the right, "Hi-yup, Molly! Hi-yup!"

Molly floundered ahead and went to her belly in a drift.

"Hi-yup, girl!" Mike encouraged. "Hi-yup! We make 'im yet! You see."

Molly struggled forward and found firmer footing, only to plunge knee-deep in another drift a few feet farther on.

Mike shielded his eyes with a hand and tried to get his bearings, but the swirling snow shut out ev-everyhing except the immediate drifts beneath him, the drifts that pulled at Molly's trembling legs. He could not see the slope of the land. The undulation of drifts had hidden the contour beneath a rolling blanket of mystery. There was no up, no down, just billows of white that lost themselves in almost instant nothingness.

Molly stumbled, and Mike fell forward to her neck. He clung there with both arms while blackness and confusion hammered at his brain. "Steady, girl," he whispered. "Steady." Then complete lethargy swept over him, closing in upon him, severing mind from body. "Steady," he whispered again, and slid slowly from her back into a soft bed of oblivion.

Mike awakened to find himself engulfed in a bright blanket of white. It took a while for his eyes to adjust sufficiently to find that the whiteness about him was the clean, soft sheets of his own bed and the brilliant sunlight that streamed through a window. He hadn't seen sunlight for more than a month, and its glare hurt his eyes. He squinted and shifted his gaze upward. Maria was standing beside him, her dark, shy eyes filled with anxiety.

"You—you all right?"

Mike shifted his position tentatively. "Y-yes . . . Maybe . . . I-I guess so."

She bent lower. "You have company," she whispered. "I bring him in."

She left, and a moment later the doorway was filled with the bulk of Big Matt Trimbull, mine superintendent. His face was square and lined and the hair at his temples, once red, was a rusty gray. He carried his great mackinaw coat and fur cap over one arm. "You feel

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a little better now?" he asked.

"Yes," Mike said, hurriedly. "I be back to work tomorrow. Right away!"

Big Matt sat down in a chair and let his coat and cap spill to the floor beside him. "I think not," he said. "Doc says you have a very bad leg, lost a lot of blood. You stay in bed. Rest. We have a man to take your place."

Mike nodded. Naturally, a new man would have to take over, take both his jobs . . .

"We found out this morning what happened to you last night," Big Matt went on. "The trace of dynamite in Joe Spore's room, the two unfired shots, your fuse knife lying on the floor, the blood. And Joe is no longer working for us. He is a dangerous man. Besides what he did to you, he might have caused an explosion, ruined the entire mine."

Mike was silent. He was thinking about the loss of his two jobs, wondering how long he would be without work.

"Some of the boys will stop in to see you tonight after work," said Big Matt. "They want to thank you. If you had not fired the shots last night, the mine could not have worked today."

Mike shifted his position to ease the pain that was gnawing at his leg and felt the great tiredness begin to steal over him again. "Andy like that," he said, a faint smile touching his lips. "Andy like that miners want to come see me."

Big Matt picked up his cap and coat and got to his feet. "Your wife and the neighbor men would never have found you last night in that snow drift," he said, "if it hadn't been for the mule standing over you, marking the spot where you fell."

"Molly is all right?"

Big Matt nodded. "She is taking the day off and has an extra measure of oats. I'll go now so you can rest and get back to work soon." He stood for a moment looking down at Mike, wondering how in the world the injured man could possibly have persuaded a stubborn mine mule to carry him up out of the mine on her back and through a wintry blast of wind and snow. "You certainly must have a way with mules," he said, shaking his head.

Mike grinned. "Maybe we understand each other," he said. "We both squareheads."

"Whatever it is," said Big Matt, "I'm going to need you. The entries will be worked all summer to enlarge the mine, and by next fall we'll need many new mules. You will break them, train them, and help build new cars. Work all summer."

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Happiness mingled suddenly with the great tiredness that had settled over him, pushing him down. Mike felt his eyes begin to close as if on their own accord. "Andy will like that," he said, drowsily. "Andy will be proud that I work all summer." He scarcely finished the sentence before sleep claimed him, leaving a lingering smile upon his lips.

At the kitchen door, Big Matt shrugged into his great coat and began pulling on his heavy boots. "You feed him well, Mrs. Kovchec," he said. "And make him rest. He'll be well again in no time."

"Yes," Maria said, shyly, trying to hide her embarrassment. Never before in her entire life had such a great personage as a mine superintendent graced her home. He had made a special trip through the snow—and she had been too busy to tidy up the house.

Big Matt straightened up from his boots. "This Andy," he said, questioningly. "Mike spoke his name a couple times."

Maria looked at the floor. "Andy is—" She hesitated. "I don't know how to say. Andy is—well, he is what makes Mike work hard, try always to be good man."

Big Matt nodded. "I-I think I understand," he said, covering her confusion.

"If he had lived, Andy would be nearly fourteen now . . ."

Big Matt retraced the trail he had made through the sun-sparkled drifts. Once he stopped, shook his head, and then continued on again. He, too, had once had a son. But it had been so very long ago. . . .

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